



Rational Inquiry

Dare
to
think

VOLUME 12, ISSUE 2 *The San Diego Association for Rational Inquiry Newsletter* SPRING, 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.



Betraying a Holy Trust

By Keith Taylor

As program chair I had penciled in former SDARI member Dr. Seth Asser for the March meeting to tell us of progress in the efforts to bring some religious fundamentalists into the modern world of medicine. Those fundamentalists have been systematically eschewing scientific medical treatment for prayer, with dire results. Then Dr. Asser sent his regrets, so I decided to go ahead with the program. About that time the *San Diego Union-Tribune* ran several articles on the ongoing scandal of the local Catholic diocese and some of its pedophile priests. I figured it would work to include both stories in my talk.

This is an ongoing problem with the usual knotty problem of whether SDARI should become involved in religious problems.

The gist of my talk follows:

One evening my great granddaughter and I made an adventurous half-mile hike to the ice cream store. The walk was more exciting than the ice cream for the kid. Nobody can appreciate the joy of making shadow monsters more than a 4-year-old.

The little one knew for the fact that the monsters weren't real, and she trusted that as long as I was there nothing bad was going to happen to her. One cannot over-emphasize how important it is to

merit that trust and not betray it.

But grandparents and parents do betray it, sometimes by deliberately and knowingly abusing children, but more often when they substitute belief for thinking and rely on institutions that are considered omniscient but are merely immutable, immutable to the point of being dangerous.

Last month, SDARI's friend, Mark Sauer in Sunday's *Union-Tribune* paper told of a girl who, at age 17, had been abused by a local priest. The priest not only abused her but others as young as 12. Surely she understood that she was not allowed to rock the boat where the church was concerned, and doesn't that sound familiar? She kept quiet about her betrayal, her loss of innocence, her shame for 17 years, telling only her husband.

Finally, and after so many others had done so, she told her father, who by this time had become a priest himself. He was faced with a dilemma. His daughter told him of the abuse, but the abuse would embarrass the church he had chosen to obey and serve and protect I guess. He turned his back on his flesh and blood and chose to protect the institution. He didn't speak to his daughter until just before he died.

Anderson Cooper of CNN

recently aired a sad story – one especially poignant because it involved a person in the public eye. Thomas Roberts, now an anchor for CNN's Headline News, told of how he was a victim of sexual abuse at age 14 but was afraid to tell anybody. He even tried to kill himself.

After he was in college he finally learned another boy had tried to tell the same story about the same priest, but largely because Roberts didn't corroborate the other kid's story the priest wasn't prosecuted. It's not easy for a someone to stick his neck out when he knows his complaint will be rejected immediately because "a priest just wouldn't do that."

Later, and to his credit, Roberts did tell his story and together, he and the other guy, helped convict the abuser.

During the last few years we have had thousands of stories of religious inspired child abuse. Take Amanda Bates of Grand Junction, Colorado. In 2001 the 13-year-old in Grand Junction, Colorado, died from complications from untreated diabetes. Her parents had refused what most of us consider proper medical treatment while their daughter's genitalia were partially rotted away and she was bleeding from every orifice. Rather than seek the medical care which would al-

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Betraying

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most certainly have saved their child they prayed with the usual results.

A new Colorado law had made their neglect a crime and the parents were indeed tried and found guilty. The judge gave the parents probation because they were otherwise "good" and "law abiding," not an uncommon occurrence.

According to Dr. Seth Asser, Medical Director for a group called Children's Healthcare is a Legal Duty: "Even where the law prohibits such neglect fewer than one of three is prosecuted and of those convicted, no one has ever gotten jail time unless it was the second child in the family and/or there was simultaneous physical abuse."

How many kids died for lack of medical care, their deaths rationalized by "It was god's will. God works in mysterious ways?" How many kids complained to their parents that they had been molested, only to be told that their story just wasn't possible - not in the church that God put on earth to represent him? How many cops were told of the same abuses, but didn't follow up because the church is sacrosanct? How many newspapers and TV stations ignored the story because it doesn't pay to take on an institution of the almighty when the public simply doesn't want to hear of bad things of holy institutions?

Apparently the only ones who really understood what was going on and who were willing to do something about it were the leaders of the church. They found out time and time again and always took action. The Catholic Church routinely transferred the perpetrators to another church, and never warned the parishioners of the new parish.

Perhaps worst of all, religious leaders were seldom held accountable by their leaders. Cardinal Law quit his Boston archdiocese in disgrace. When his priests sexually abused children, Law simply transferred them to other parishes without even warning their new

parishioners. After the hubbub died down Pope Benedict XVI called him to the Vatican where he now holds many prestigious titles, unlike the epithets he's called in Boston where he is not so highly esteemed.

We can pass laws all we want but religious institutions will continue to flout the law and common decency unless the public gets involved. It is difficult to convince the public to get aroused as long as it considers institu-

tions holy and sacrosanct. We should start by pointing out that something isn't good simply because it calls itself holy.

Then we should do it again and again until the message gets through.

A glance at history will verify that.

Keith Taylor is program chair for SDARI. He can be reached at krtaylorxyz@aol.com

SDARI at the San Diego Science Fair 2007

The Greater San Diego Science and Engineering Fair for senior and junior high school students was held this year on March 28th. About 1300 projects were entered, a new record. The enthusiasm in the Activity Center in Balboa Park was as usual electrifyingly high, and SDARI was there with a team of judges: Edvard Hemmingsen, Walt Carver, Harry Sutton, Dee Deyanat-Yazdi, Mike Cleary, Elizabeth McHugh, William Hulsey, A.B. Kovacs and myself. We took 3 hours 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 presence of the students), a small number of the junior and senior projects remained. On re-entering the exhibit hall, the students were all present so that we could examine the chosen exhibits in detail and talk to the students, thereby making sure that our selections met simple scientific standards.

It was unanimously decided that one of the senior projects: "*Patient Safety: Testing the Effectiveness of Patient Medication Information*" (Michael Vredenburg, Carlsbad High School) deserved the Ernie Ernise-

see Award, the 1st place prize in the senior division. A 2nd prize went to the senior project "*Alternative Means of DNA Preservation: Dry Storage on Filter Paper*" (Megan Morikawa, High Tech High School). We awarded 1st prizes in the Junior Division to projects entitled "*Astrological Compatibility*" (Katharine Sundberg, Marshall Middle School) and "*Can Aromatherapy Really Reduce Anxiety?*" (Ariel Feifel, Soille S.D. Hebrew Day School). Second prizes in the Junior Division went to projects "*Pseudo-random Numbers*" (Keegan Mann, San Pasqual Union), "*They're Controlling My Mind' -- Effectiveness of Foil Against Transmitted Waves*" (Sarah Miller, Guajome Park Academy) and "*CSI Forensics: Absorption and Extraction of DNA from Various Fabrics*" (Kamei Triebell, Rhoades School).

The winners and their guests have been invited to the April 22nd SDARI meeting to show their displays, talk about their projects and receive their prizes. 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. Please plan to attend.

Barbara Hemmingsen
Chair, SDARI Science Fair Committee

Rational Musings

by the President

In this column I'm going to muse about terrorism, comedian Bill Maher, where America ranks, "The Secret", and having some fun being a skeptic.

Stephen Maurer of UC Berkeley has some interesting views regarding terrorism. According to Maurer, "The Invisible Man" by H.G. Wells is a satire on terrorism, which was a topic of interest on the European continent in the 1890's. H.G. Wells was satirizing the view that terrorists are "invisible" and therefore unstoppable. Maurer agrees with Wells that this view is wrong. "If you look at history," says Maurer, "terrorist plots come unglued with great regularity." It's hard to find good people, hard to train them, and hard for them to fit in to hostile environments. We don't need to take big or drastic measures to be effective, terrorists are tripped up by small things all the time according to Maurer. (Totalitarian states usually don't have terrorism problems because the state is scarier than the terrorists.) Maurer calls for a rational, frank debate on the pros and cons of different measures, followed by specific recommendations. We must be adults and face the fact that life is sometimes dangerous and uncertain, with hard choices to make.

In his comedy special, "I'm Swiss", comedian Bill Maher discusses what he calls "the morals and values crowd" and expresses skepticism about their true values, morals, and beliefs. "Believing that the Earth is 5000 years old and was created in 6 days, that's not really a moral or a value, it's just stupid", jokes Maher. "What they're talking about are rituals, superstitions, traditions, personality cults. I was taught morals and values were choices we made about how we treat other people. Fairness, kindness, tolerance, generosity, honesty, courage. Those are actual morals and values." I couldn't agree more. FYI, according to Maher, he does believe in

God, but insists that "God does not write books".

The January 14, 2007, *Parade* magazine contained an article about where America ranks in comparison to other nations. Bill Maher argued that we can actually measure our morals and values based on where we choose to spend our resources, and where we don't. I would argue that our rankings among the nations of the world is such a measurement. We are #1 in Nobel Prize-winners (296), billionaires (371), Internet users (205,327,000), roads (3.98 million miles), airports (14,858), and railway tracks (140,805 miles). We have 460,000 armed forces stationed abroad in 144 countries, more deliverable nuclear weapons, and lead the world in arms sales. We're #1 in imports, #2 in exports. We have the largest gross domestic product, gold reserves, national debt, trade deficit, and federal foreign debt. But 38 other nations have lower unemployment rates. We spend the most on health care, but 43 nations have more doctors per capita, 49 have more hospital beds per capita, 33 have a lower infant death rate, 28 have a lower maternal death rate, and close to 30 have a longer life expectancy. We're #1 in calorie consumption per capita and obesity. What do numbers like these tell us about our values?

When I first heard about "The Secret" I couldn't believe it (*Ed. Note :Consult Internet's Wikipedia for a description of this latest version of "The Power of Positive Thinking"*). I couldn't believe that anyone would fall for such an obvious and transparent scam! It reminded me of something I read years ago in one of the skeptic magazines, where a skeptic exclaimed, in frustration, "how many times do we have to prove that astrology doesn't work?" Apparently, the answer is that we shall have to keep proving it, over and over again, for a very long time.

I think what's happening in the world of computers is a good parallel for what we skeptics experience. For as long as there have been computers, there have been computer hackers. For all the time, money, and resources that have gone into

stopping hackers, spammers, phishers, and their ilk, and protecting us from their invasive and destructive creations, their numbers continue to grow. These vandals, con-artists, and thieves are not only more numerous, but as we work harder to protect ourselves from them they become smarter and more sophisticated. There is no end in sight to the battle against these predators. And we skeptics face the same challenge with the frauds and swindles we deal with. As soon as the public gets wise, or more likely, bored, with the current scam, the con of the week, the fraud du jour, a new one takes it's place.

Usually, the new scam is just an old scam with a new label. Criminals have been using the same scams over and over again for decades—possibly even for centuries. That's why educating the public about deception is so important. (In a previous column I stated that I define Skepticism as the study of deception—self-deception and deception by others.) In my experience, a little knowledge goes a long way in recognizing deception, so learning enough to protect yourself is not difficult.

In interviews I've heard James Randi say that he thinks people want to be lied to, want to be bamboozled, want to give their money to frauds and quacks who make false promises and deliver false hopes. I find it hard to disagree with his conclusion.

It seems that if you are going to be a skeptic, you need to be tough, thick-skinned, and determined. And never give up. That said, I think you can have fun, too! Our monthly meetings begin with a social hour, where you can meet and eat and socialize with other skeptics. Before our meeting on Sunday, April 22, SDARI has a booth at the Earth Fair 2007 in Balboa Park from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. You can not only help to educate the public about skepticism, reason, and science, you can meet interesting people, visit the wide variety of booths, and spend a fun day enjoying the fresh air and sunshine.

Paul Wenger

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From the Editor's Desk

SDARI and the Science Fair. In the Fall of 1999, our Board of Directors decided that we should get involved in the Greater San Diego Science and Engineering Fair by awarding prizes for excellent student projects that reflected the philosophy of SDARI. A special appeal for funds was made to the general membership and, with supplements from our operating fund, we have been able to award prizes for seven consecutive years. The current Board strongly supports our participation in the Science Fair and trusts that the general member-

ship agrees that it is a most worthwhile project. It gives exposure to SDARI in the community, and more importantly, it rewards young people for approaching issues or problems in a creative, logical and rational way. As a parent of a child who won professional society awards, I can testify to the very positive impact such recognition has on a young person. In a broader context, we will learn why the Science Fair is important at our May 27th meeting. Phil Gay, the President of the Science Fair, will be our speaker.

We are again at a point where contributions to the Science Fair fund are needed. We require about \$1200 a year to support this project because we give

1-year subscriptions to *Skeptical Inquirer* in addition to 1st and 2nd prizes in the Senior and Junior Division (\$200, Sr, 1st; \$150, Sr., 2nd, max. 2; \$125, Jr, 1st, max 2; \$100, Jr, 2nd, max 3). We hope that at least some of our members, and others, will rise to the occasion and donate a tax deductible contribution in any amount. Checks should be made out to SDARI and mailed to our Treasurer; be sure to indicate that the money is for the Science Fair Fund. We especially need contributions to Ernie Ernisse fund, set up to honor one of the early true, active skeptics in San Diego, and a founding member of SDARI.

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Geothermal Energy: A low-polluting power source

The emission of carbon dioxide to the atmosphere by burning fossil fuels has become a paramount problem in search of a solution for our energy needs. In certain parts of the world, developing geothermal energy plants would be part of a solution.

At the SDARI meeting on January 28 this year, geologist Donald Albright from the San Diego Natural History Museum presented a fascinating overview of the geothermal resource that exists in our own back country, and the geological features that have created this resource, namely the special plate tectonic subduction process that is taking place under the Imperial Valley.

After Albright's informative lecture, I signed up with the Museum for a field trip led by Albright to visit one of the geothermal power plants in the area, located near the Salton Sea. This trip took place on March 17. It turned out that there was much to be learned about the operation of these power plants. There are several plants in full operation, and they have been so for a number of years. However, only a fraction of the capacity of these geothermal fields has so far been developed. These fields are among the largest ones in the world, and are the largest ones on this continent.

To reach the fields of hot rocks and superheated brine, drilling must be done to depths of 5000-9000 feet. The brine is trapped in porous rock formations under

great pressure. When the pipes have been put in place, the pressure forces the brine to the surface. There the brine's heat content is converted to super hot steam which is used to drive the turbines of the electrical generators.

About 80% of the cooled brine is pumped back under pressure to the hot rock reservoir. The process operates as a closed system from which little pollution escapes to the atmosphere.

Even though the energy supplied by the hot brine is "free", substantial costs and some smaller environment concerns are associated with its use. For example, very expensive large titanium pipes must be used because of the severe corroding effect which the brine has on steel and other materials. But even so, the system must be shut down regularly to remove deposits in the pipes. Some minerals can be obtained from the brine, but recovering them is not now commercially feasible.

The numbers related to the use of geothermal energy for electricity generation are impressive. The current electrical output from the Imperial Valley operations alone is 340 Megawatts, equivalent to the electrical demand of more than 330,000 homes. Just south of the border, in Mexico, the Cerro Prieto fields produce 720 Megawatts, enough to meet more than 50 percent of the total demand of all of Baja California.

An important factor is that the energy derived from geothermal heat is low-pollution. For example, with the current level of operation in the United States, each year 22 millions tons of carbon

dioxide, 200,000 tons of nitrogen oxides and 110,000 tons of particulate matter are NOT emitted to the atmosphere because we used electricity from geothermal resources rather than burning fossil fuels.

So why is geothermal energy generation not being developed more rapidly in California? One reason is that the State has very extensive, time-consuming, complex environmental regulations that must be adhered to. In time, these issues will be resolved. A more serious problem may be the transmission of the electricity to markets, and to San Diego, in particular.

The capacity of existing power lines is insufficient to handle a substantial increase in power generation. New additional lines from the desert to San Diego are under study. The most cost-effective and efficient proposed routes for the lines have caused concern and raised objections from part of the public. Some of the debate surrounding the proposals has been somewhat less than rational, so far. But, no doubt, the issues will be resolved because the expansion of geothermally generated electricity is critically important for the future.

Edvard A. Hemmingsen

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WE NEVER STOP INVESTIGATING. WE ARE NEVER SATISFIED THAT WE KNOW ENOUGH TO GET BY. EVERY QUESTION WE ANSWER LEADS ON TO ANOTHER QUESTION. THIS HAS BECOME THE GREATEST SURVIVAL TRICK OF OUR SPECIES.
- DESMOND MORRIS

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.

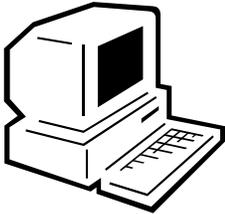
Lecture Schedule and Meeting Location

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
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We are on the Web!
sdari.org

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Up-coming events

in the **Joyce Beers Community Center** (See page 5 for directions):

Sunday April 22, 2007.

6 p.m. Pre-meeting social hour. Free pizza and soda will be served.

7 p.m. Award presentation. The Science Fair student winners of the SDARI awards for 2007 will receive their prizes. The students will present and answer questions about their projects. Dr. Elie Shneour will be Master of Ceremony.

Sunday May 27, 2007.

7 p.m. Lecture: Phil Gay, *Fostering Science & Technology in our Future Citizens via Science Fair Experiences*. Gay has been the President of the Greater San Diego Science and Engineering Fair for many years, and has an excellent insight into its value.

Sunday June 24, 2007.

7 p.m. Lecture Video Dr. Richard Wiseman, *Luck, ESP, and Magic. How Science Tests the Unusual*. An enlightening and entertaining lecture presented at the Skeptics Society. Dr. Wiseman started his working life as a professional magician. His later work as a psychologist has been reported in 40 academic articles.