

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.



Greater San Diego Science and Engineering Fair

SDARI was well represented at the Greater San Diego Science and Engineering Fair on March 24, 2004. Judges Edvard Hemmingsen, Walt Carver, Dwain Deets, Douglas Reeves, Grete Porteous and their leader, Barbara Hemmingsen, 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 pseudo-scientific claims; discrediting irrational thinking; testing claims of authorities). After this initial screening (done without the presence of the students), about 15 of the junior projects and 2 of the senior projects remained. The judges then examined these exhibits and talked to the students. It was unanimously decided that neither senior project merited a first prize, and only one deserved a 2nd prize: "Tea Extracts Inhibit the Proliferation and Differ-

A Review of the Amazing Meeting II

By Harry Sutton

Most skeptics are familiar with James "The Amazing" Randi. After a successful career as a stage magician and escape artist, he has become one of the leading voices for skepticism and rational inquiry in this country. In 1996, he founded the James Randi Educational Foundation (JREF), which has as its aim to promote critical thinking by reaching out to the public and media with reliable information about paranormal and super-natural ideas so widespread in our society today.

JREF and Randi are perhaps best known for the Million Dollar Challenge, offered to anyone who can show, under proper observing conditions, evidence of any paranormal, supernatural, or occult power or event. To date no one has passed the preliminary tests. The prize, held in escrow, was originally \$10,000 in cash, but has now grown through donations to well

over one million dollars in the form of negotiable bonds.

Beginning last year (2003), JREF began holding annual conferences. This year's conference, titled, "Amazing Meeting II", was held in Las Vegas at the Tuscany Hotel and Casino over the weekend of January 15-18, 2004. My wife and I attended.

Filling a large convention room were nearly 400 skeptical attendees, many of whom are also professional magicians. Most notable were these presenters: the inimitable Penn & Teller (and yes Teller does talk, quite eruditely), Banachek (the world's leading mentalist), Jamy Ian Swiss (slight of hand), Ian Rowland (mentalism), Las Vegas mainstay Lance Burton (all types of stage magic), and last but certainly not least our host Himself, the Amazing Randi.

Briefly, here is a synopsis of the various



Your New Editor

Hello readers. This issue finds me as your new editor, as well as new to SDARI. I best take a moment to introduce myself.

My wife and I recently moved to the San Diego area from the high desert near Los Angeles. Our home is now in Leucadia. My career was with the NASA Dryden Flight Research Center, at Edwards Air Force Base. I came up through the engineering path, on to general management at that center.

While in general management, I was involved with a large variety of flight projects. One of these is in the news as I write this. The X-43A just had a dramatic success in its test flight of its scramjet engine at hypersonic speeds. This vehicle is unmanned, a term that carries some politically incorrect baggage. In recent years, there was quite a movement toward unmanned test aircraft, going under such terms as remotely-piloted or autonomous aircraft. I was one of the advocates for this movement, but took a lot of flack from the mainstream test community. I find many similarities now between being an advocate then for remotely piloted aircraft in the midst of what is traditionally called the manned-flight community, and being an advocate now for secularism in the midst of a superstition-infatuated society.

One of those similarities involves the difficulties with language. There weren't any good terms that sounded positive. Unmanned, unpiloted, uninhabited, uncrewed, all words that sound negative.

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Meetup.com as a Means to SDARI Growth

By Rich Collins

How do you find and assemble a group of like-minded skeptics out of the millions or thousands of residents in a city or town? In past years, BM (before Meetup.com,) you had a difficult task unless you could afford paid advertising. Small organizations usually depended upon low-cost or no-cost ads in alternative papers, handbills and posters in public places, and word of mouth to spread their message. Now, Meetup.com offers a better

way and it is virtually free.

The vision is simple: give internet users a mechanism to find each other and organize monthly meetings around topics that members themselves propose and support. Currently, there are over 1,000,000 Meetup.com members devoted to over 4000 topics. Name a human interest and you can probably find it represented by a Meetup.com group.

San Diego Skeptics, as our topic

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presentations, beyond those which involved primarily magic entertainment.

Dr. Michael Shermer, head of the Skeptic Society and publisher of *Skeptic Magazine*, described his new book, *The Science of Good and Evil*, which is a study of the origins of morality and ethics, demonstrating that these human traits long predated organized religious dogma.

Dr. Eugenie Scott, Executive Director of the National Center for Science Education, discussed creationism (in its several guises) and its impact on public education.

Hervey Cunningham Peoples, author of *The Human Question*, continued the discussion of the creationism/evolution debate with emphasis on human origins.

Peter Bowditch, author of many books on various topics, is active in the skepticism movement in Australia. He talked about health issues in his home country, especially the so called "Complementary Medicine".

Banachek, mentioned above, in addition to demonstrating his Mentalist powers (I'm convinced!), discussed how he and a colleague used simple stage magic tricks to fool numerous parapsychologists for four years (180 hours of actual "testing") into believing they really had paranormal powers.

Dr. Bob Park is Professor of Physics at the University of Maryland, among other endeavors. He presented his "Seven Warning Signs of Voodoo Science".

Dr. Steve Barrett, leader of Quackwatch and vice president of

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Rational Musings

by the President

“He also made the stars.” Genesis gives the stars but a passing mention, almost an afterthought, created after the sun and moon on the fourth day, lights for signs and seasons. Their apparent insignificance was supported by the fact that stars commonly appear to fall from the night sky. But about 400 years ago Bruno speculated that stars are actually other suns, perhaps with planets of their own. With his crude telescope, Galileo saw that the mysterious Milky Way is actually made up of countless stars. A couple of centuries later, William Herschel determined that the Milky Way is actually shaped like a tremendous wheel containing billions of stars. It was assumed the Milky Way galaxy was the whole universe. But in the 1920s Edwin Hubble proved that many of the cloudy patches appearing among the stars are actually other galaxies far outside the Milky Way. As we now know, the universe contains billions of galaxies, each with billions of stars.

Does other life exist out there? There is a line in Carl Sagan’s movie *Contact*: “[I]f it is just us, it seems like an awful waste of space.” Only in the last few years have we had

the technology to detect planets around our nearest stars, but over 100 such planets have already been discovered. Apparently the universe is filled with stars with planets, and we know most planets have moons. Simple life arose on Earth almost as soon as it became habitable, when liquid water appeared. The rover Opportunity has just provided solid evidence that Mars once had a period when it also was habitable. Perhaps it had life, too. Jupiter’s moon Europa apparently has liquid water beneath its giant frozen ocean. Perhaps it has life now. I have had my home computer running SETI@home for nearly five years, 24 hours a day, analyzing radio noise from space for signs of intelligence. Nearly five million people are running SETI@home, but of the thousands of promising signals so far, none have been verified. If our robots find no life on Mars or Europa, the search for simple life will be over. But the search for intelligent life among the stars will not end unless it succeeds.

Finding extraterrestrial life would be the greatest scientific discovery ever, in my opinion. As much as I hope we succeed in my lifetime, I doubt we will.

But I could be wrong.

Richard Uhrich

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entiation of Adipocytes” by Azaam Samad, who won a prize from us last year in the junior division. In the junior division, two 1st prizes were awarded: “Is Eyewitness Testimony Accurate?” by Michael Landan and “Weed Killer: Effectiveness and

Harm to the Environment” by Julia Wilson. Also in the junior division, three 2nd prizes were awarded: “Do Low-Flow Toilets Actually Conserve Water?” by Drew Spence, “Get More Miles from Your Gas Tank” by Ryan Purdy, and “Which Acne Medications Are Most Effec-

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January Meeting Report

The Changing Faces of Jesus

Bill Cooke, Ph.D., at the January 25, 2004 SDARI meeting, spoke on The Changing Faces of Jesus. Sometimes we get lucky. After a three month period with one meeting canceled because of the huge fire that threatened our homes, another with low attendance because a computer glitch prevented our sending out a notice, and our annual hiatus for the holidays we finally had a real meeting. Lucky indeed were the attendees.

Dr. Bill Cooke from Buffalo by way of Kenya, England, and New Zealand kept an audience of more than forty riveted to their seats as he put on his slide show “The Changing Faces of Jesus.”

And who was Jesus anyhow? Cooke said he was a rabbi named Joshua. The stories about him were mostly the reflection of the authors’ various beliefs. Just as important were the many depictions of him in paintings and sculptures. Paintings often held to be sacred variously showed him as warlike, peaceful, clean shaven, bearded, Jewish, German, and as an All American young man. He was even depicted as a starving prisoner in a concentration camp. Each portrait made a point, usually a political point, and the point reflected the artist’s own bias.

Although Cooke described himself as an atheist he was conciliatory, ending his remarks

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February Meeting Report

Movies and the Religious Right: Some they Love, Some they Hate

The country is all agog over the movie, *The Passion of the Christ*. Churches bought out entire theaters and let their parishioners in without charge. The movie is breaking box office records everywhere. That's to be expected in a country where about nine of ten Americans believe in God, most of them Christians.

In fact, one would think that any movie about Jesus would be welcomed. After all there is little agreement on just who Jesus was or what he meant to mankind. Surely yet another look would be appropriate. Not so! A movie showing him to have very human desires was greeted with cries of outrage. Outlets were boycotted. Violence occurred. One owner of four video stores in St. Louis was run out of business, harassed, even arrested on bogus charges, all because he refused to pull a movie, *The Last Temptation of Christ*, off

the shelves.

Dr. Darlene Lieblich, a vice president and censor for Cox Cable news and other TV outlets was our speaker in February. She told of how even a movie about the outrage has been thwarted by zealots. Still she and other producers persist and a movie called *Heart of the Beholder* is underway.

The movie tells of one of America's most outrageous examples of bigotry. Ken Tipton, the video store owner, was not only the subject of a boycott and picketing, he was railroaded on bogus charges. Even though it happened about 20 years ago the zealotry remains to this day. Perhaps it's increasing.

We ignore it at our own peril. Such outrages ought to be the subject of rational thinking everywhere.



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That's why we coined the expression "remotely-piloted." It sounded positive.

I did have credentials with manned aircraft. My major hands-on project was the F-8 Digital Fly-By-Wire. In this, we removed the mechanical links of the flight control system and replaced them with a high-integrity computer system. In the first phase, we actually used the guidance computer system from the Lunar Excursion Module out of Apollo. In the second phase, we developed a redundant system using the same computers that the Shuttle would then use. Thus, developing computer systems of such integrity that the pilot's flight safety could be assured.

What in that background relates to the editing of a newsletter on rational inquiry? The answer rests mostly in things I have done since retiring from NASA four years ago. The past two years, I have been and continue to be the layout editor for the Atheists United (AU) newsletter. AU is a Los Angeles based organization with about 400 members. Their newsletter is published monthly.

I have also become active in two international secularist organizations. For the Brights' Net, I am leader on their web-links team. For Atheists Alliance International, I am the leader of their Individual Members Group.

I look forward to many enjoyable times with you SDARI folks here in San Diego.

Dwain Deets



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with "I feel deeply sorry for what happened to poor Rabbi Joshua." Perhaps the program was summed up by one attendee, himself a Christian. He acknowledged the brilliance of the speaker and commented that it could have been given to any group, Christian or not.



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tive Against *Propionibacterium acnes*?" by Lindsey Drake.

The winners and their guests have been invited to attend the April 25th meeting to tell us about their projects and to receive their prizes. Please come at 6 p.m. to congratulate these fine young people. We are ordering in pizzas and soft drinks so come for dinner.



March Meeting Report

The Bizarre Fabrication and Promotion of Intelligent Design

Mark Perakh, Professor Emeritus of Physics at California State University, Fullerton, spoke to SDARI about his new book, *Unintelligent Design*. The March 28, 2004, meeting exposed the audience to the bizarre goings on by the proponents of this so-called Intelligent Design concept. Professor Perakh told a number of behind-the-scenes stories about the leading spokesman for Intelligent Design, William A. Dembski. Many of these involved blatant self-contradictions on the part of Dembski, which, when brought to his attention, simply resulted in an abrupt change to a different topic.

One of the more alarming matters is that the Intelligent-Design proponents claim that their explanations aren't necessarily connected to an assumption of a God. As Perakh explained, this is really just part of a strategy for

getting their theory adopted as a science into the public school curriculums. Dembski and his cohorts are pressing ahead as if they would be able to make the case that this wasn't a religious teaching, and therefore be viewed as science.

Professor Perakh showed examples where Dembski claims to answer the criticisms of his opponents. Dembski presents page after page of impressive looking responses to all of these statements of concern, but avoids all the major names in the field of evolutionary-biology, as well as avoiding the questions raised by our speaker in his book that is devoted to criticizing Intelligent Design. The fact that Dembski's responses are impressive looking to the eyes of his financial backers of the Religious Right is all that Dembski really needs to continue this rather bizarre livelihood.



Come on and join San Diego Meetup.com Skeptics. We only need 13 new members to rocket to first place in the world wide standings. Think of the good conversation and joy you'll experience sharing ideas and conversation with rational people for a change. Sign yourself up, and then get out your address book and invite your skeptical friends and neighbors.

What to Expect

When you go to a meetup what can you expect? Well, here are some comments from participants in similar Meetup meetings in several different cities:

"We had a terrific meeting. Met new people and had a really enjoyable time. Looking forward to the next one!" (San Francisco)

"Wit and camaraderie, ebullience, sparkling dialog, piercing insights, mental stimulation, humor, a birthday cake, and elevation of consciousness on multiple simultaneous planes." (Sacramento)

"I think that these meetups are a great idea. It's a great way to meet people; You never have to be concerned about what you're going talk about; and people without a brain don't show up." (San Diego)

"...The meetup was wonderful all in all...we talked and laughed and had a great time for almost two and a half hours! We are definately going to be meeting again..." (Tacoma, WA)

"Great meetup. We had a lot of interesting discussion! Talked

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of interest, hopefully will attract people not yet aware of SDARI, but very much in alignment with its objectives.

Some Comparisons

The San Diego Skeptics meetup group is very new and currently has nine members. For comparison, here are the stats for the in top 10 skeptic Meetup.com groups in the world:

1. Ithaca, NY (21 members)
2. Washington, DC (18)
3. Northern Virginia (15)
4. New York City (15)
5. Seattle, WA (12)
6. London, England (10)
7. San Diego, CA (9)
8. Denver, CO (9)
9. Montreal, PQ (9)
10. Oklahoma City, OK (9)

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the National Council Against Health Fraud, discussed “Alternative Medicine” which he referred to as only a marketing slogan. Of course we know that so much of what constitutes alternative medicine today is nothing but the same good old snake oil sold by the charlatans of a supposedly less enlightened era.

Dr. Phil Plait is an astronomer and physicist most famous for his book and web site *Bad Astronomy*, which debunks some of the foolish nonsense about astronomical and related subjects. Dr. Plait (pronounced “plate”) is also one of the most interesting and humorous scientific lecturers I’ve had the pleasure to hear. His hour was worth the price of admission alone.

Julia Sweeney is an actress and comedian, most famous for the androgynous character “Pat” which she created for *Saturday Night Live* (1989-1994). She has appeared in a number of movies and has had a one-woman show on Broadway. For us she performed her monologue “Letting Go of God” about her long and torturous struggle from apparently devout Catholic to full blown atheist. Her 40 minutes at the dais was also fully worth the price of admission.

All of us who have had e-mail accounts for any significant length of time have received the “Nigerian Scam” messages – purporting to award us a huge sum of money if we only help some supposedly persecuted person in Nigeria (or other African country) to escape their evil dictator, with their even

larger sum. The scam has been around for a long time— long predating the Internet. Now some folks are scamming the scammers. Dean Cameron has been playing the Nigerian Scam artists in the same way he plays his acting roles, masterfully. He showed us how in a re-creation of the many e-mails and phone calls that have actually taken place over the past few months.

Dr. Ray Beiersdorfer is Professor of Geology at Youngstown State University. He discussed the magic of crystals – or rather the lack of magic. Earlier he had asked all of us to pick up one of the many raw amethyst stones he had laid out on a table in the back of the meeting room. His point was that keeping the stone (containing amethyst crystals) in our pockets or purses during the conference didn’t have any of the magical effects that crystal believers espouse.

Finally, the Amazing One Himself summed up the meeting on Sunday morning as only he can do. I’ll let the famous writer Arthur C. Clarke sum him up:

“I regard Randi as a national treasure, and perhaps one of the remaining antidotes that may prevent the rotting of the American mind.”

I agree. Amazing Meeting II was a great success, one of the very best such conferences of the many I’ve attended in the past 15 years. If the randomness of our favorite universe permits, my wife and I will be back for Amazing Meeting III. Stay tuned!

A Personal Note

On Saturday afternoon during the Amazing Meeting, this writer got directly into the act. Renown illusionist Lance Burton was performing, and came into the audience look for a “strong guy” to assist him. I have no idea why he chose me.

I accompanied him to the stage and assisted him in donning a standard straight jacket. After taking a brief bow for this arduous task I returned to my seat. Mr. Burton then proceeded to escape from the jacket in something less than 90 seconds. I disclaim all responsibility for that.

But speaking of Mr. Burton, my wife and I recommend his show at the Monte Carlo Hotel and Casino in Las Vegas, which we saw in 2003. Mr. Burton specializes in close-up magic. We also recommend Penn & Teller’s show (at the Rio Hotel and Casino) which includes some very off-beat magic.

Harry Sutton



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politics a lot as well as nontheism. Flyers were given out for publicizing (thanks to the zoologist), and I met a fellow physicist! Looking forward to the next one.” (Ithaca, NY)



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: _____

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Special interests: _____

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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

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.) The location of the meetings is the Joyce Beers Community center, 1220 Cleveland 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.

Submission of Manuscripts

Articles, essays, book reviews, letters to the editor, cartoons, and other written material may be submitted to *Rational Inquiry*. Pertinent announcements and clippings are welcome also. The submissions are subject to editing and abridgement. The approval of the author(s) will be sought for changes that materially affect the content. Published material becomes the property of SDARI unless copyrighted by the author. Submitted articles that contain copyright material must have the permission from the copyright owners before publication. Such permission must be submitted to the editor in writing. Anonymous material will not be considered.

Please send material for publication to the editor at dad2wrk@cox.net.

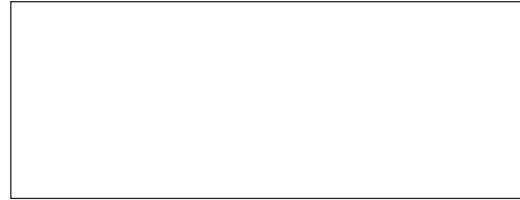


Visit the webpage of SDARI to get the latest information on lectures and other events sponsored by the Association. You also will find other interesting facts and links to other organizations with goals similar to, or related, to ours.

The Webmaster is Harry Sutton.

www.sdari.org

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We are on the Web!

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Up-coming events:

In the **Joyce Beers Community Center**, 1220 Vermont Street, San Diego (see p. 7 for directions):

Sunday April 25, 2004, 7 p.m. Presentations of SDARI awards to San Diego Science Fair participants, and discussions by the award winners about their projects.

Sunday May 23, 2004, 7 p.m. Gordon Babst, Professor of Political Science at Chapman University, will give a talk on the history of marriages down through the ages. This ought to be especially interesting in view of the current flap over same sex marriages.

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