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 Organization for
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 (SORT)**

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For past issues, bibliography, links to other skeptics, and more, check out the SORT Website: <http://www.quiknet.com/~kitray/index1.html>

SORT's Next Meeting:

**Wednesday, Mar. 29, 2000
 7:00 P.M.**
 La Sierra Community Center,
 Room 415
 5325 Engle Road,
 Carmichael, CA

The *SORTified* NEWS

"Doubt is the beginning of wisdom."
 —Clarence Darrow

March Meeting "OOPS, THERE I GO AGAIN!"

OBEs: Out-Of-Body Experiences

Out-Of-Body Experiences—hallucinations, tricks of the mind, viruses of popular culture, or actualities? What do you think? Join us at SORT, Wednesday, March 29th, as we discuss OBEs and view some video tape clips of people who claimed to have left their bodies at the time of near death and entered into the realms of the beyond. It's time again for some great conversation, some stimulating ideas, and free coffee, soft drinks and snacks. Bring yourself, bring a friend, and be prepared for a lively and entertaining evening.

We'll be at La Sierra Community Center, 5325 Engle Road in Carmichael, just off Walnut, at 7:00 p.m. on Wednesday, March 29, Room 415.

GOLLY, DEEPAK, YOU ARE SO SMART!

Did you catch John Carman's column in the March 8th, 2000, issue of the *San Francisco Chronicle*? Seems that the world's favorite spiritual guru Deepak Chopra wasn't too happy

because he was bumped from a recent appearance on the "Today" show. Apparently Chopra, who was scheduled to go on the show and promote his new book *How To Know God*, was replaced at the last minute by Rick Rockwell, everyone's favorite groom of "Who Wants To Marry A Millionaire" notoriety. The Chopra segment was apparently then taped to run the next day but ended up being bumped again. Chopra claims that the "Today" people told him he was too brainy for their show. Although the Chopra interview may have run by the time you read this, it certainly hadn't appeared by the time cohost Katie Couric was presenting her own colonoscopy screening for entranced viewers, and this was the last time that we haven't looked in. Isn't television wonderful!

According to Carman, Chopra, although angry at first, now had turned a positive light on the experience. Or, as Carman quotes him, "I had a taste of the 'sacred response' through the experience of reverence and gratitude for a God that makes things happen just as they are supposed to, and for providing me with the opportunity to witness how my reality changes in different states of awareness. I feel love and appreciation for everyone engaged in this little drama." If this isn't "brainy" what is it? Look out Murray Gell-Mann!



A GOOD, HEALTHY FOOD FIGHT

Deepak isn't the only trendy guru to get his feathers ruffled recently. From the pages of the *Boston Globe* 3/8/2000 comes the story of a recent debate held at the US Department of Agriculture between—as the *Globe* called them—“All the grand shamans of modern nutrition and diet.” According to the *Globe* report, the king of dietary gurus Dr. Robert Atkins found himself in a rather sloppy verbal food fight with some of his would-be competition including Barry Sears “inventor of “the Zone,” Dr. Morris Bethea, and Dean Ornish of “Sugar Busters” fame. In the words of the *Globe*, “These educated men of science offered much silliness during their three hours together.” Bethea said carrots were “too fattening,” and Sears called food “the most powerful drug anyone will ever encounter.” In the course of the evening apparently Ornish, on a roll with his book, *Eat More, Weigh Less*, took to calling Atkins a “cynical huckster” and blasted the “toxic” diets of both Atkins and Sears—noting “I am not aware of any studies that Dr. Atkins, or Dr. Sears have published in any peer-reviewed journal.”

Then, according to the *Globe*, Sears pointed out that “two of the subjects of a vaunted Ornish study died of heart attacks.” Things got hot and heavy enough apparently for another want-to-be food guru, Dr. John McDougall—“A veggie diet

author who runs a fat farm in California's Napa Valley”—to jump in and call Atkins's, Sears's and the sugar busters' diets the “make yourself sick diets.” McDougall then began pushing the magic of potatoes.

According to the *Globe* you can download the debate from the net on the USDA Web site or send away for a \$20 video. Grab a snack of pork rinds and enjoy!

SO WHAT HAPPENED TO HIS GET-AWAY CAR?

From the BBC comes news that Ramar Pillai has been arrested.

Who, you ask is Ramar Pillai? Well in India he is famous for being the inventor of herbal fuel for automobiles. Apparently, though, Ramar was actually mixing a little secret concoction that included Benzene and toluene (industrial organic chemicals that he was apparently pilfering from refineries), along with his famous herbs. The fuel was only a little less expensive than ordinary fuel but it has been making Ramar a fortune and is still selling in India.

Coming soon to America? Why not? You know what those gas prices are, and after all, we already know how wonderful herbs are, so why are they prosecuting this guy for just trying to make a little natural money?

The Sacramento Organization for Rational Thinking (SORT) . . .

- Is dedicated to the promotion of rational thinking in all areas of life.
- Upholds the superiority of science over the mystical.
- Promotes and supports all efforts of intelligent communication that provide a counterpoint to the strong waves of anti-rationalism, irrationalism, and mysticism sweeping the world today.

Toward these ends we . . .

- Host a monthly discussion group.
- Publish a monthly newsletter.
- Host special events, talks, and presentations.
- Host a web page.

While SORT began with and still continues to be concerned with the promotion of critical thinking in areas dealing with the pseudo-scientific, the paranormal, the mystical, and the fraudulent, we strongly promote critical thinking in all areas of human thought and endeavor.

The core of SORT activities is our discussion group. The art of intelligent conversation is not dead. We at SORT believe that rational conversation--the meeting of minds, the free exchange of ideas and the provocative stimulation of critical questions-- is one of the most civilized and enlightening of all human activities.

SORT discussion topics have ranged from UFOs to the Holocaust, from "alternative medicine" to the problems in communicating science to the public, from classic and recent cons and scams to the teaching of critical thinking. Our discussions are hosted by one of the SORT founders, and participants are by no means limited to experts (although they may include experts) but are made up of intelligent and questioning people concerned with the topic of the evening.

AUM . . . WELL, SOMEONE'S GOT SOME EXPLAINING TO DO

And, since we are in far parts of the world, you might have seen this story already from UPI or the *New York Times*. But, in case you've missed it, it seems that computer companies affiliated with the Aum Shinrikyo doomsday cult have been developing software for the Japanese Defense Ministry. The Aum cult, which killed 12 people and injured many others in a nerve gas attack on the Tokyo subways a few years back, has many wide-ranging financial interests throughout the world. Among these, apparently, are a number of computer companies who have not only been selling software programs to the Defense Ministry but to at least 10 other government agencies and well over \89 other major Japanese companies. The Defense Ministry has immediately suspended all use of the software developed by companies associated with Aum. Government officials, who preferred to remain unnamed, said that they were worried that Aum could use information gained in developing the programs that the cult could use in crippling vital defense, communications, and computer networks. They also suspect that Aum may have planted viruses or developed secret openings to allow the cult to penetrate government and private industry firewalls. Isn't the world an interesting place?

A Book Note:
TELL IT LIKE IT IS!
The Universe, the Eleventh Dimension, and Everything: What We Know and How We Know it, by Richard Morris

Going from the ridiculous to the sublime, we note a new book by San Francisco physicist Richard Morris. Always a favorite of ours for his clear prose style and down-to-earth explanations of some thorny topics in physics and astrophysics, Morris's new book doesn't let us down. Here he offers a razor-sharp overview of the current state of scientific knowledge about the Universe, the creation of matter, and the creation and evolution of life, and he manages to do so in a mere 228 pages of this paperback published by Four Walls Eight Windows, New York and London 1999.

One of the things that we have always appreciated about Morris is his ability to draw the line for the reader between the actual state of scientific knowledge and, shall we say, some less-than-always disciplined theorizing on the part of many scientists and science writers. Here Morris once again takes a clear stand, separating the fact from the speculation. Not that he totally discards the speculation—today's speculation may become tomorrow's fact. But, by sorting the two out for the reader in a clear and concise manner, he give us a much clearer overview of what we actually do know at the present—or at least are 99% sure that we've got right, what may be inspired but forever

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About the Founding Members:

Ray Spangenburg and Kit Moser are a husband-and-wife writing team specializing in science and technology. They are co-authors of 29 books and over 100 articles, including publication in the *Skeptical Inquirer*, and they are former co-editors of the *Bay Area Skeptics Information Sheet (BASIS)*.

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unprovable “guess-work” and what may actually become the accepted new theories of tomorrow.

It's a great read and we recommend it with enthusiasm.

UPDATE: A REVIEW

Paradigms Regained, by John Casti. New York: William Morrow, 1999

An updated look at some of science's most perplexing and interesting questions that he had first taken a look at in his now classic *Paradigms Lost: Images of Man in the Mirror of Science*,

Casti's new book brings the story up to date.

Looking at such questions as the origin of life, the influences of the gene on human behavior, theories of "innate language," the possibility of "man-made minds," intelligent life elsewhere in the Universe, and the problems of "Objective reality" and the quantum world, Casti sets his book up in the form of an appeals court—re-examining those issues featured in his earlier book and deciding if the verdicts reached in 1989 still hold true or are open to change today.

Recognizing that the reader may not be familiar with the earlier work, Casti supplies a brief overview of the conclusions reached in the late 80s before launching into fascinating and informative discussions of the scientific progress made within those subjects in the last twelve years. A totally engrossing and occasionally surprising book done very well.

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Coming in April:
"THE DEVIL MADE ME DO IT!"

Join us in April as we take a journey through time to take a look at history's biggest scapegoat. We'll be looking at some video clips, hearing some fantastic tales, and examining some horrific stories, not from just the past but from yesterday's newspapers. Be ready for some great discussion as we look at what has been done, and claimed to have been done, in the name of the Devil.



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*"Educating ourselves
and educating others"*

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