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WORLD CONFERENCE

For past issues, bibliography, links to other skeptics, and more, check out the SORT Website:

www.quiknet.com/~kitray/index1.html

May
SORT Meeting
Wednesday,
May 29, 2002
7:00 P.M.

Room Sierra One
La Sierra Community Center
5325 Engle, Carmichael

The *SORTified* NEWS

“Doubt is the beginning of wisdom.”

—Clarence Darrow

STEPHEN JAY GOULD

(SEPTEMBER 10, 1941–MAY 20, 2002)

GOODBYE STEPHEN: YOU WILL BE GREATLY MISSED!

May 29, 2002 SORT Meeting **GENETIC ENGINEERING AND THE GHOST OF FRANKENSTEIN**

OK. Here is the problem. The nation is about to make some very important decisions about the future of humankind and we are drawing a lot of our ideas, feelings and arguments from some pretty shaky sources. Certainly we are informed by our culture, and just as certainly we are misinformed by it.

Genetic engineering and biotechnology are very much a part of our present and future lives. The decisions that we make about therapeutic and reproductive cloning and about genetically modified foods and crops will effect not only our future but also the future of generations to come. And yet, much of the discussion of these important topics is haunted by the superstitions, fictions and mythologies of our past.

It's not for nothing that opponents of genetically modified foods have taken to calling GM foods “Frankenfoods.” Or that oppo-

nents of human cloning, either therapeutic or reproductive, protest against “scientists playing God.” Certainly there are good, logical and informed arguments for both sides in this controversial topic, but finding them amidst the cultural baggage dominated by sensational and romantic mythologies and fictions is not always an easy task.

This month at SORT we will be discussing the genetic engineering controversy. Your hosts and SORT co-founders Ray Spangenburg and Kit Moser are currently under contract for a book on this controversy—and we encourage your thoughts and contributions in our round table discussion. It should make for a lively and provocative conversation. Join us as we try to separate the facts from the fictions, the good reasons to be pro or con . . . and the bad ones.

As usual free coffee, soft drinks, cookies and assorted goodies will be available.

Remember, all SORT meetings are free and open to anyone who

wishes to attend—last Wednesday of the month (May 29 this month), 7:00 p.m., Sierra One Room, La Sierra Community Center, 5325 Engle Road, in Carmichael.

THE FIRST REALLY GOOD REASON TO BE AGAINST REPRODUCTIVE CLONING!

From our favorite wild and wacky pseudonews site, “The Weekly World News,” online edition, comes this little item. It seems that in London recently Dr. Nunzio Altiplano, described by WWN as “a well known fertility expert,” announced that a perfect clone of (hold your breath) *Richard Simmons* has been achieved! The WWN quotes Dr. Altiplano as exclaiming, “This is an enormous breakthrough . . . Not only have I duplicated a human being for the first time in world history, I have duplicated a great human being!” Dr. Altiplano continues, “I have set the guidelines for future human cloning—to propagate only the best in mankind.” According to the WWN, Dr. Altiplano decided to duplicate Simmons while he was doing sit-ups as he watched a Simmons “Sweating to the Oldies” video. “It struck me that this was the kind of a man the world needs more of. His incredible wit and sagacity made me see that there should be more men like Richard Simmons—many more,” Altiplano gushed. “And I intend to make many more clones of Richard—an army of them—to help the world.” We can see it now: a veritable army of Richard Simmons clones marching over the horizon!

Hey, guys, you’ve topped yourselves with this one!

IT’S A BARNUM AND BAILEY WORLD, JUST AS CRAZY AS IT CAN BE . . .

Most readers have probably already seen the findings of the National Science Foundation’s biennial report on the state of science understanding, research, education and investment, and have been appropriately discouraged to discover the lamentable results of their survey: 60 percent of Americans surveyed believe in psychics and extrasensory perception, 30 percent believe that UFOs are intelligent visitors from other planets, 41 percent believe astrology has a scientific basis and another 25 percent believe that the positions of the planets can effects people’s lives. It’s further sad to note the latest report on the state of American publishing. According to a *New York Times* report on a recent booksellers’ convention in New York City, books dealing with “spiritual connectedness” are at an all-time high. As *NY Times* writer Martin Arnold puts it, “The most assertive aspect of book publishing these days seems to be the selling of the incorporeal: connectedness to God, wellness, perfection of the spirit.”

According to *The Times*, the book industry’s trade journal *Publishers Weekly*, reported in its April issue that religious titles were at the top of its annual lists of both best-selling fiction and non-fiction. *The Times* also notes that the “One Spirit Book Club,” a division of the Book of the Month Club, “started in 1995 with 20,000 members and now has more than 400,000.” Other numbers in the book game were equally huge. *The Times* tells us that *The Prayer of Jabez*, a book

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.

based on “an obscure prayer by an old testament figure sold some eight million copies,” while *Desecration*, “the ninth in the Left Behind series of apocalyptic novels by Tim LeHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins, sold nearly three million copies.”

LeHaye has also just switched publishers, *The Times* reports, making a four-book deal with Bantam-Dell publishing for a new series of books, “reportedly for \$45 million.”

So while, according to a recent Gallup poll, one out of every three people believes that aliens have visited Earth in the past, 40 percent believe in ghosts and haunted houses, and 30 percent think that it is possible for some people to communicate directly with the dead, the book publishers continue to rake in the dollars, television and movie companies cater to the anti-science and scientifically ignorant viewers, and the world continues to spin.

ON A MORE UPBEAT NOTE, MAYBE . . .

The World Health Organization (WHO), a branch of the United Nations, announced this month that it intends to catalogue and distribute information on the “folk” and so-called “alternative medicine” treatments used throughout the world. Pointing out that many of these treatments can be dangerous, Dr. Ebrahim Samba, one of the organization’s regional directors, told *The New York Times*, “We must act quickly to evaluate safety, efficacy, quality and standardization.” Dr. Jonathan D. Quick, the organization’s

director of essential medicines, told *The Times*, “We’re not pushing to be the global anything—this isn’t the black helicopters.... There’s no W.H.O. policy that says, ‘You should regulate herbal medicine this way.’ We’re just trying to get information out there.” Quick pointed out that people appeared to be polarized on the subject “uninformed skeptics who don’t believe in anything, and uncritical enthusiasts who don’t care about data.” He added, “We want to convince the skeptics that some things work and make the enthusiasts more cautious because it can kill them.”

THE BRITS TAKE SOME BITS OUT OF MULDER AND SCULLY

A little more upbeat news, this time from England where the *Guardian* and *Observer* website reviewed a new book called *Out of the Shadows* by David Clarke and Andy Roberts. According to the review, the authors conclude from their research that Cold War hysteria sparked the UFO obsession in England. After uncovering “thousands of previously secret government and military reports and investigating dozens of sightings,” Clark and Roberts observe that the whole UFO craze, which continues to this day, is “nothing but a social phenomenon.” Clarke and Roberts also point out that while many of the early UFO sightings in England appeared to have been confirmed by Britain’s fledgling radar system, as the radar technology improved, the number of instances appearing on radar “quickly dwindled to zero.”

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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 52 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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SORT PICNIC IN JULY!

We might be seeing some flying objects at SORT, too, but they will probably be flying frisbees at the Annual SORT Picnic. We are still in the process of firming up plans for time and place, but need to get our arrangements

(plans for food, etc.) set at THIS MONTH'S meeting. As it stands now, we are looking at a few public parks in the Sacramento area (such as Howe Avenue Park or Cottage Avenue Park or . . . ?) and we're shooting for a weekend in mid- to late-July. There is a \$40 fee for reserving park sites and we'll need to get our reservation in by the end of May (i.e., right away). We can use your input on our final decisions—and some volunteers to help things run smoothly.

CSICOP FOURTH WORLD SKEPTICS CONFERENCE!

For those of you who haven't already planned your vacation or would like just to improve your life with some stimulating thinking, the Fourth World Skeptics

Conference hosted by the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal (CSICOP) is coming up in June.

Scheduled for June 20–23 in Burbank, California, it's the first time the conference has been located on the West Coast—previous events have been held in Buffalo, New York; Heidelberg, Germany; and Sydney, Australia. SORT advisor and longtime friend Robert Steiner will be one of the speakers and the line-up includes such other heavy hitters as Harlan Ellison, David Morrison, Marvin Minsky, Jan Brunvand, David and Barbara Mikkelson, Wallace Sampson, Stephen Barrett, Joe Nickell, Massimo Polidoro, Richard Wiseman, Paul Kurtz and many more. For schedules,

prices, venues, and more information call or write Barry Karr:

CSICOP
P.O. Box 703
Amherst, N.Y. 14226

(716) 636-1425 ext. 217

You can also reach Barry via e-mail at: Skeptiq@aol.com.

Try and make it if you can! It will probably be a long time before the conference comes so close to us again!

Note: We are looking for a correspondent to cover the event. If you do plan on attending and are interested in writing up a report on the conference for the *SORTified News*, let us know.

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*Educating Ourselves
and Educating Others*

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