

July 2004  
Volume 7, Issue 7  
Publication of the  
**Sacramento  
Organization for  
Rational Thinking  
(SORT)**

### Inside This Issue

- 1** July 28, 2004 Meeting:  
HAPPINESS IS A WARM  
PUPPY—OR MAYBE NOT
- 2** ON THE BOOK FRONT:  
SOCIOLOGY OF RELIGION  
AND IDIOT PROOFING
- 3** CAUGHT IN THE NET
- 3** CONGRATS TO RON AND  
ANTONIO!  
SORT PICNIC REPORT
- 4** THE RATIONAL COMMUNITY  
CALENDAR

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

[www.quiknet.com/~kitray/index1.html](http://www.quiknet.com/~kitray/index1.html)

For more about the co-founders of SORT, see

[www.spangenburgandmoser.com](http://www.spangenburgandmoser.com)

**July  
SORT Meeting  
Wednesday,  
July 28, 2004  
7:30 P.M.**

La Sierra Community Center  
Room 800, 5325 Engle Road  
Carmichael, CA  
(See driving directions)

# The **SORTified NEWS**

**“Doubt is the beginning of wisdom.”**

—Clarence Darrow

## July 28 SORT Meeting HAPPINESS IS A WARM PUPPY—OR MAYBE NOT

Albert Camus once wrote “You will never be happy if you continue to search for what happiness consists of. You will never live if you are looking for the meaning of life.” Setting aside our deep respect for Camus for just a little while, though, this month at our July SORT roundtable we will be taking a look at happiness. It’s a word that obviously means many different things to many different people. Sometimes it’s a fleeting moment, an emotion that most of us have felt at one time or another, an apparently transcendent, emotional “high”—the child on Christmas morning, the adult standing on the sandy beach at night watching the sunset. Sometimes we demand more, though, or deem it our due that “happiness” comes not only in moments but plays out as a background for life, the canvas on which we paint our lives. But is it our due? Is it the canvas or is it the paint? Why, understanding as most of us do, that it is the paint, do we spend so much time feeling somehow, even though we know better, that it’s the canvas? And why is this chemical reaction so important to us anyway? What does it mean to be “happy”? What does it mean to be “unhappy”? Is the happy person somehow more “com-

plete” than the unhappy person? More loving? More productive? More “giving”? More “accepting”?

Paradoxes abound. Mazes complicated. Richard Corey puts a bullet through his head. Van Gogh gives us sunflowers. We like to think the rich and powerful unhappy, the poor and simple happy, but we know it isn’t always so. The lover says that he/she lives for the happiness on the loved one’s face. Sometimes the hangman smiles. We feel pleasure doing a kindness. Do we do the kindness for the pleasure? Does the act of kindness become less?

Join us then at our July open roundtable as we try to unravel some of the mysteries of happiness. As usual free coffee (decaf and regular), cookies and other treats will be available to help keep the conversation warm and comfortable. Bring yourself, bring a friend, and spend an evening with good talk and interesting people. (See driving directions on page 3.)



### ON THE BOOK FRONT

It’s been both an interesting and a sad month for us as we lost our

little ten-year-old Boston Terrier Fitz to a series of seizures and a brain tumor. A constant companion through all the craziness of deadlines and other travails of the writing life, he will be sadly missed. On the upside we received advance copies of our new and revised five-book series on the history of science, and the finished books kind of brightened our days through the little guy's tough times. We've also signed up with our publisher for a new series of books—biographies of an interesting group of scientists not written about very much before, so we will be kept interested and busy for the next couple of years. Through a sheer stroke of luck we've also acquired a new face in the house—a two-year-old pug we've named "Gatsby," since his attitude appears to imply that he considers himself "great." It's going to be a tough job fulfilling our Boston's duties, but Gatsby is a natural clown and so far he shows every indication of giving it a good try.

Best bets on books this month: Phil Zuckerman's *Invitation To The Sociology of Religion*, published by Routledge, and *Idiot Proof* by Francis Wheen, published by Public Affairs. Despite its rather dull-sounding title, the Zuckerman book is nicely written in an easy, conversational, and sometimes personal style, and, while we sometimes found ourselves at odds with some of Zuckerman's opinions, much of it is quite provocative. The Wheen book, as advertised on its front cover, is an attack on "deluded celebrities, irrational power brokers, media morons and the ero-

sion of common sense," managing to just about live up to its promises, a fast, ironically tuned assault on irrational thinking and a lot of fun to read.

### CAUGHT IN THE NET

If you love research as much as we do, you might want to take a fascinating excursion into the wonders of PDF files, a resource that lays hidden like some semi-secret city in the worldwide community of the Net. The best route is to hop onto Google and begin your search with an entry such as [PDF "spiritualism"]. You might also want to keep a CD or DVD disk handy to dump your goodies on and have them available to read on your laptop. (Note: one CD can hold lots of books.) What you will find is a wonderful excursion into rare, old, and often unavailable books, esoteric articles, student papers, and a fabulous assortment of lost writings. So far this month we have downloaded literally dozens of complete five- or six-hundred page books, including rare manuscripts on 19th-century spiritualists, books by Madame Blavatski that you don't want to pay your local book store for even if you do find them there, complete manuscripts of most of John Dee's alchemical writings, and literally dozens of books by various crackpots, occultists, and mystery mongers. If you don't want to take the time to read the books, at least you have them on hand on a handy disk for later research or just plain fun reading. And, if you don't want to go that deep, you can track down lots of academic papers, or other writings on subjects that grab your interest.

### 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.

Note: If you don't already have a free PDF reader you can download one at:

<http://www.adobe.com/products/acrobat/readstep2.html>. Incidentally, to save a lot of time you can also pick up the free DAP (Download Accelerator Plus) that will speed your download time amazingly. You'll find that at: <http://www.download.com/Download-Accelerator-Plus/3000-2071-10297786.html?part=dl-dap&subj=dl&tag=button>.

### CONGRATULATIONS, RON AND ANTONIO!

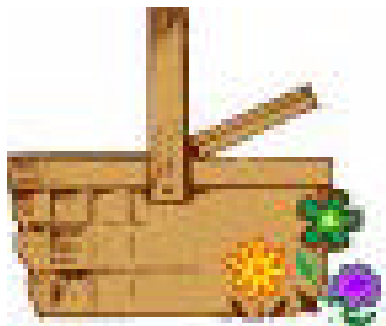
High kudos go to "SORTer" Ron Frederickson, winner of the 2003 Citizen Sane Award announced in the June 2004 issue of *Skeptical Briefs*, the newsletter of the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal (CSICOP). And congrats as well to fellow-SORTer Antonio B. Nafarrate, who was chosen as the only runner-up from among what CSICOP described as stiff competition.

The Citizen Sane competition honored letter writers at the grass-roots level for their consistent and able "defense of reason and clear thinking against the constant assault of pseudo-science and other nonsense currently at work in our society."

Four of Frederickson's published letters and one of Nafarrate's were included in *Skeptical Briefs*, where you can peruse their prizewinning defenses of reason for yourself by picking up a copy at the next SORT meeting.

### FUN FOR ALL AT FOURTH SORT PICNIC

A special thank you to Jack Throne for providing SORT with a free venue for our annual picnic this year. It was a sunny June day, and we had lots of shade and a giant barbecue. And thanks to both Jack and Louise Throne for arriving early to set up tables, prepping the area, and cleaning up afterwards. Close to two dozen SORTers brought fabulous foods, with Darrell Fronczek at the grill (a special thanks to Darrell, too!), played horseshoes and cribbage, and clustered in animated conversation. Lon and Michiko's little dogs kept watch for intruders (of which there were none, aside from a lone skateboarder who could happily have joined us. It was a delightful afternoon. Thanks to all!



### BOARD OF ADVISERS

**Terry Sandbek**  
Psychologist

**Robert Sheaffer**  
UFO Specialist, Author

**Bob Steiner**  
Magician, Author, Bunco Expert

**Lauress Wise**  
Mathematical Psychologist

#### 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)*.

For more information, contact:

**SORT (Sacramento Organization for Rational Thinking)**  
Phone (916) 978-0321  
Email [kitray@quiknet.com](mailto:kitray@quiknet.com)

### GETTING TO LA SIERRA COMMUNITY CENTER

**From Highway 50:** Take the Watt Avenue exit and head north. Turn right on Marconi, by the Raley's store. Travel east on Marconi to Walnut and turn left. Travel north on Walnut to Engle and turn right. Turn left at La Sierra Community Center. Follow the road past the main parking lot and along the east side of the building. The new meeting room is in the second building on the left. Park, look for the SORT sign, and come on in!

**From I-80:** Take the Madison exit and head east. Turn right on Garfield and head south. Turn right on Gibbons and left at La Sierra Community Center. Follow the road along the east side of the building. The new meeting room is the last building before the open, grassy area. Park, look for the SORT sign, and come on in!

---

---

## RATIONAL COMMUNITY CALENDAR

### July 28: *SORT Meeting*

*Topic:* “Happiness Is a Warm Puppy—Or Maybe Not”

*Time:* Wednesday, 7:30–9:00 p.m. (social period until 9:30)

*Place:* La Sierra Community Center, Room 800, 5325 Engle Road, Carmichael

Everyone is welcome and all meetings are free.

### August 8: *AOF Meeting*

*Speaker:* Summer (Freethought) Sizzler (hot summer speeches on freethought topics)

*Time:* Sunday, 2:30–5:30 p.m.

*Place:* Sierra II Community Center, 2791 24th Street, Room 10. (South of Broadway).

Visitors welcome. *Cost:* Free

### August 13: *Sacramento Skeptics*

Dinner followed by meeting.

*Topic, Time, and Place:* To be announced.

For details, contact Richard Kowaleski at [kowaleski@earthlink.net](mailto:kowaleski@earthlink.net) or Liam McDaid at [McDaidW@scc.losrios.edu](mailto:McDaidW@scc.losrios.edu)

---

---

© 2004 by Ray Spangenburg and  
Kit Moser. All rights reserved.

# **SORT**

*Educating Ourselves  
and Educating Others*

**Sacramento Organization  
for Rational Thinking  
P.O. Box 2215  
Carmichael, CA 95609-2215**

ADDRESS CORRECTION REQUESTED