



News & Views

A Publication of Atheists and Other Freethinkers

Atheists and Other Freethinkers newsletter: News & Views

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October Meeting

The speaker at the October 11 meeting will be Joanne Fuller, whose topic will be "Compromising Our Children's Future--A Critical Look at the U.S. Military Budget Past and Present." Joanne is a long-time Sacramento peace activist who has just recently begun to be recognized for her tireless efforts. She is a board member of National Peace Action, the largest grass-roots peace movement organization in the country. She returned from Hiroshima in August, where she represented Peace Action. She spoke at the annual commemoration of the atomic bombing and presented the mayor with 1000 cranes made by Sacramento schoolchildren (in modern Japanese mythology, 1000 cranes represent peace and hope). Recently, Joanne received funding as a "peace voter" coordinator, in which she organizes activists to ask congressional candidates at forums and debates uncomfortable questions such as why priority goes to pork barrel Pentagon programs and national healthcare is forgotten. Joanne's dynamic speaking style is exceeded only by her enthusiasm.

Internet site of the month

The website of the month is:

<http://www.secularhumanism.org/cfa/>

This is the web site of the Council for Secular Humanism, and "cfa" is the Campus Freethought Alliance portion of this site. The CFA, which Paul Kurtz has said may be the CSH's single most important project, recently issued the Bill of

Rights for Unbelievers, which can be found at this site. Maybe someday there will be as many CFA groups as Campus Crusades for Christ.

September Speaker

The speaker at the General Meeting was Dr. Joe Morrow, professor of psychology at CSUS, in his portrayal of ACE The Magnificent, a mind reading psychic. Joe has been an atheist since age 13, when it was revealed to him that there was no god.

He began to do psychic magic about 15 years ago when he realized how he had been taken in a few times by persons who claimed to have special powers. He became convinced intellectually -- by reading several books -- that the special powers that they claimed to have did not exist. He thought he could make that point by learning psychic magic himself. So he read more books, subscribed to magic journals, purchased tricks from magic shops, and created ACE.

In his introduction, ACE pointed out that his mother was also psychic; when he was a boy, she knew where he had been and what he had been doing.

Joe did not use the introduction that he frequently uses, where he is billed as a well-known local psychic. While that gives him credibility in some circles, he did not think that it would provide credibility to the AOF audience.

Joe demonstrated many tricks in which he appeared to be reading persons' minds. He was quite convincing. Some tricks required statistical probabilities, an understanding of human nature (including that of freethinkers!), and just plain schtick. They involved a variety of common props: books, coins, cards, keys and forks. There were a number of rounds of applause.

Joe was asked if he read faces, and he said he could not. However, he "read" one audience member's hand. When he missed on reading her career path, he fell back on a reading of her "love line", with greater "success".

After about 35 minutes, Joe stopped doing psychic tricks, and explained that he was NOT special, that what he was doing were magician's tricks (most of which he would not explain). He did identify some props that needed preparation, like the fork that bent under the power of his intense and focussed concentration.

Several interesting topics came up in the question and answer period. Joe noted that the ESP studies done by J. B. Rhine at Duke University were once prominent, but are generally not now believed. A lab assistant was found to be faking data. Also, Charles Tart at UC Davis did some research in this area which involved a random number generator and found statistically significant results. An error in the random number generator generated sequences which were not truly random, and when that was corrected for, the significance disappeared.

In a discussion of the possibility of transmitting information by thought waves, Joe noted that certainly there were measurable brain waves, which is what makes EEGs possible. However, carrying words or images on these brain waves is a different idea altogether. There is no evidence that this can be done.

He pointed out that the Skeptics have a million-dollar reward for a scientifically reproducible demonstration of ESP or other psychic phenomena, but they have not had a successful taker.

Joe talked about meeting James Randi at a professional convention and discussing magic with Randi and other magicians well into the night.

Joe got into his interest in skepticism through an interest in flying saucers. He started as a believer, but after reading skeptical writings such as those of Philip Klass, he had to change his thinking.

Joe said that he uses "ACE The Magnificent" as a vehicle, in his classes and in other professional settings to demonstrate the fraud in psychics and psychic phenomena. His was a fine and entertaining performance, a "scientific" demonstration of the "art" in the con artist.

Steve Knapp email: sknapp1@mindspring.com

While we are on the topics of skepticism and magic, a note on a boggling exercise in hairsplitting comes from "The pope versus the aliens", by Polly Toynbee, Guardian Weekly London, May 31, 1998, via Freethought Today (September 1998). The Pope is preparing an encyclical against superstition. Specifically, the Pontifical Commission is writing a report about the dangers of people believing in magic, levitation, visitations by spirits, aliens, angels and the like. Basically, the run of New Age phenomena is taboo.

This could be hard to keep straight.

Wafers and wine really do become flesh and blood, but when a magician places a picture of a bird under a handkerchief and a live bird emerges, that cannot be believed.

When bodies ascend to heaven, wherever that may be physically located, that is believable; but when a Las Vegas magician levitates his assistant, that is dangerous to believe.

If you see an apparition of the Virgin Mary in your corn flakes, that's real, but if it's an apparition of your late Uncle Harry, well, that's a delusion.

Like the hawker at the baseball stadium keeps saying, you can't tell the players without a scorecard. Especially when the players all look alike.

Quotes of the Month

"If the belief in god were natural, there would be no need to teach it. Children would possess it as well as adults, the layman as the priest, the heathen as much as the missionary. We don't have to teach the general elements of human nature; -- the five senses, seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, and feeling. They are universal; so would religion be were it natural, but it is not. On the contrary, it is an interesting and demonstrable fact, that all children are

Atheists, and were religion not inculcated into their minds they would remain so.

Even as it is, they are great skeptics, until made sensible of the potent weapon by which religion has ever been propagated, namely, fear - - fear of the lash of public opinion here, and of jealous, vindictive God hereafter. No; there is no religion in human nature, nor human nature in religion. It is purely artificial, the result of education, while Atheism is natural, and, were the human mind not perverted and bewildered by the mysteries and follies of superstition, would be universal."

Ernestine L. Rose, "A Defence of Atheism" (1878, *Women Without Superstition* ed. Annie Laurie Gaylor, Madison, WI: FFRF, 1997).

The Argument For The Remediating Of Injustice

Then there is another very curious form of moral argument, which is this: they say that the existence of God is required in order to bring justice into the world. In the part of the universe that we know there is a great injustice, and often the good suffer, and often the wicked prosper, and one hardly knows which of those is the more annoying; but if you are going to have justice in the universe as a whole you have to suppose a future life to redress the balance of life here on earth, and so they say that there must be a God, and that there must be Heaven and Hell in order that in the long run there may be justice. That is a very curious argument. If you looked at the matter from a scientific point of view, you would say, "After all, I only know this world. I do not know about the rest of the universe, but so far as one can argue at all on probabilities one would say that probably this world is a fair sample, and if there is injustice here then the odds are that there is injustice elsewhere also." Supposing you got a crate of oranges that you opened, and you found all the top layer of oranges bad, you would not argue: "The underneath ones must be good, so as to redress the balance." You would say: "Probably the whole lot is a bad consignment;" and that is really what a scientific person would argue about the universe. He would say: "Here we find in this world a great deal of injustice, and so far as that goes that is a reason for supposing that justice does not rule in the world; and therefore so far as it goes it affords a moral argument against deity and not in favor of one." Of course I know that the sort of intellectual arguments that I have been talking to you about is not really what moves people. What really moves people to believe in God is not any intellectual argument at all. Most people believe in God because they have been taught from early infancy to do it, and that is the main reason. Then I think that the next most powerful reason is the wish for safety, a sort of feeling that there is a big brother who will look after you. That plays a very profound part in influencing people's desire for a belief in God.

Bertrand Russell, *Why I Am Not a Christian:*
An Examination of the God Idea and Christianity

"Many religionists are good people--but they would be good anyway. Religion does not have a monopoly on good deeds. Most modern social and moral progress has been made by people free from religion--including Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, Charles Darwin, Margaret Sanger, Albert Einstein, Andrew Carnegie, Thomas Edison, Marie Curie, H. L. Mencken, Sigmund Freud, Bertrand

Russell, Luther Burbank and many others who have enriched humanity. Most religions have consistently resisted progress--including the abolition of slavery; women's right to vote and choose contraception and abortion; medical developments such as the use of anesthesia; scientific understanding of the heliocentric solar system and evolution, and the American principle of state/church separation."

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Picketing Promise Keepers

American Atheists will be picketing the Promise Keepers at Arco Arena on Saturday October 10, from 7:00 a.m. to 12:00 noon. Several AOF members will be joining them along with several members of another Northern California atheist group. Contact **Dave Flanders at 485-6669 or e-mail flanders@jps.net** for more information. American Atheists will provide signs, or you can bring your own.

Freethinkers' Forum

Back by popular demand, the AOF discussion group will begin meeting again in October. Jody Craig will host the first meeting. The date and time will be announced at the October general meeting. There will be a sign-up sheet, and the attendees will determine (in a semi-democratic fashion) what the topics, format, and rotation of location will be.

Audio/Video Guidelines

The AOF board has approved audio/video guidelines, so the future recording of AOF programs should create less chaos and more benefit to AOF members. The guidelines ensure that the audio/video production is coordinated to minimize the distraction of the members and speakers, yet maximize availability of the message of the AOF speakers to "promote the understanding and acceptance of atheism in our community."

In addition to making the process smoother for all concerned, the guidelines require that (unedited) VHS copies be made available for use by the AOF membership within 30 days of the meeting.

Persons planning to record the AOF speakers should contact **Peggy Lucas, email: YoLucas@webtv.net** or any other AOF board member, at least three days before the scheduled meeting to get a copy of the guidelines and to complete the required request form.

Highway cleanup

Despite the well-publicized Coastal Cleanup weekend on September 19 and 20, only four AOF members turned out for the cleanup of our two-mile stretch of Highway 99 immediately north of Elkhorn Blvd. They were **Dave Flanders, Mynga Futrell, Paul Geisert and Don Knutson**. With such a poor turnout, considerable amounts of trash remained uncollected, fouling the environment.

Apathy and inaction are common in Judeo-Christian societies. I hadn't previously acknowledged its apparent influence on AOF. If our organization is to continue to include a "highway cleanup project" among our activities, the general membership must be willing to invest the time to make it a reality. Two hours every two months isn't too much to ask. The next highway cleanup is scheduled for Saturday, November 14 at 9a.m.

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