

The REALL News

The official newsletter of the Rational Examination Association of Lincoln Land

"It's a very dangerous thing to believe in nonsense." — James Randi

Volume 7, Issue 6

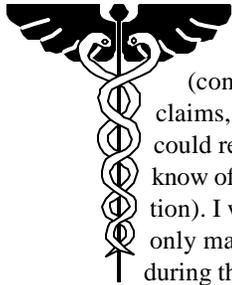
June 1999

Selling Irrationality at a Holistic Health Fair

by David Bloomberg

I dressed as inconspicuously as possible, wearing jeans, a *Star Wars* T-shirt, and a Blackhawks jacket. But it didn't matter – I still stuck out like a sore thumb.

I was at the Holistic Health Fair (April 24, Signature Inn, Springfield) and I can't remember the last time I felt like such a fish out of water, gasping for breath (not so much a breath of oxygen, but one of rationality). I was almost certainly the only skeptic there, but that



wasn't why I stuck out (contrary to their claims, I doubt any of them could read my mind and know of my REALL affiliation). I was also almost the only man there (at least during the time I attended).

The booths were staffed completely by women, with the exception of one husband-wife team; women made up almost all the attendees as well (I saw one man, who came with his significant other).

Even the way the booths were set up seemed to target women: The handouts were different shades of pink, women's jewelry was displayed, etc.

So no matter how much I wanted to just blend in and look around, it was simply impossible.

Nonetheless, I went about my business of picking up flyers and looking at what the various people said they could do for me. I was somewhat surprised to see **four** Tarot card readers (out of about 16 booths) at a health fair! Two were combined with other items (a store and a chiropractor), while two were stand-alone (all

had customers seated while I was there). One threw in some ufology as well and another, Colleen, said she was recommended by the late Greta Alexander (Colleen's flyer says she is a "Doctor of Metaphysics," among other things). So what were they doing at a health fair? I think Editor Wally hit it on the head when I mentioned this to him. He said, "They know their audience." In other words, the people who come to a holistic health fair are likely to also believe in psychic readings.

In fact, some of the participants didn't seem to make a distinction between health and spirits. One woman's card advertised "Advanced Pranic Healing" (don't ask, I don't know what it is either) alongside "Contact with the Spirit Realm."

Even the most normal-looking booth, for the local vegetarian club, was staffed by a "Certified Reiki Master." I talked to a few people and picked up as many flyers as I could hold. Here is what I found:

A flyer on "radonics" equated "the sub-conscious nervous system" with "our Spiritual 'Being.'" It added, "Every organ in the body has it's (sic) own unique energy frequency field." They use "the vibrational energy of natural herbal oils" to "create a healing." And they use "a psychic body analysis" to find the "frequency disruptions" they

need to heal.

The Tarot reader/ufologist's flyers quoted Deepak Chopra, talked about "symbolic dream language," and said "I believe that trying to understand [UFOs and alien abductions] is the single most important aspect of human evolution in our society today" and that she hopes to form an abductee support group soon.

I found four flyers on Reiki. One said that, through a special "attunement process," a Reiki practitioner "becomes an open conduit and minister of the energy

I was almost certainly the only skeptic there, but that wasn't why I stuck out. I was also almost the only man

of Reiki, the Breath of Spirit. The attunement cannot be explained in physical terms..." This flyer linked Reiki directly with "the hands of Christ" and says the symbol for Reiki was "revealed to a Japanese Christian."

A second flyer on Reiki never mentioned Christianity at all, but said, "The essence of Reiki is as alive today as it was hundreds of years ago when it was recorded in the Sutras." It talked about the "Universal Life Force" instead of the

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Purpose

The Rational Examination Association of Lincoln Land is a non-profit educational and scientific organization. It is dedicated to the development of rational thinking and the application of the scientific method toward claims of the paranormal and fringe-science phenomena.

REALL shall conduct research, convene meetings, publish a newsletter, and disseminate information to its members and the general public. Its primary geographic region of coverage is central Illinois.

REALL subscribes to the premise that the scientific method is the most reliable and self-correcting system for obtaining knowledge about the world and universe. REALL does not reject paranormal claims on *a priori* grounds, but rather is committed to objective, though critical, inquiry.

The REALL News is its official newsletter.

Annual Membership Rates: Regular, \$20; student, \$15; family, \$30; patron, \$50 or more; subscription only, \$12.

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Secretary-Treasurer.....	Bob Ladendorf
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Wally Hartshorn
David Bloomberg
Jim Rosenthal

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The views expressed in these articles are the views of the individual authors and do not necessarily represent the views of REALL. ❖

From the Editor Wally Hartshorn

Greetings from your new editor! And from your old editor, in a sense. I was the editor for the first few issues, created between REALL's founding in February 1993 and the first elections in May. (I declined to run for the position, under the deluded notion that I had other things to do. It turns out I don't. How sad.)

Before I go any further, here's a big "thank you" to Bob Ladendorf for spending uncountable hours working as editor for the last six (!) years. Six years?! Yeesh! Maybe skeptics aren't that smart after all. ☺ (How's that for gratitude?) Thanks again for all of your work, Bob!

This issue features a new look, as if you didn't already notice. I expect that it will go through at least a few tweaks, if not a complete overhaul, as I experiment to find the best look. Please send me some feedback (e-mail to editor@reall.org) so that I can improve it for next time. Thanks!

This issue features an article by David Bloomberg about his experiences at a recent "holistic health fair" held in Springfield. As you might expect, "holistic" includes everything but skepticism.

In addition, I've put together a summary of the talk I gave in March, "A Daily Dose of Skepticism." This briefly highlights some of the better skeptical web sites you can find on the Internet, including two that I maintain.

That's all for this month. See you in July!❖

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Predictions

- More Weird Web Sites
- Additional Updates on the Bennett Braun Case



From the Chairman

David Bloomberg

Well, I'm still here, but chairman is about the only office that *didn't* change hands this year!

As Bob Ladendorf mentioned in his editor's column last month, he decided to recharge his batteries instead of running for editor this year. So Wally Hartshorn has taken the reins. (Wally was actually REALL's first editor, and did the first three issues before we had an election.) With Wally becoming editor, that left the Secretary/Treasurer position open, and I convinced Bob to take that. (That was before I told him how much work it entailed.)

Derek Rompot told me that he did not foresee having enough time to properly attend to the duties of Vice Chairman (it just wasn't in the cards), so now Jim Rosenthal has been elected to that position – as well as being appointed to the Editorial Board, on which Derek also sat. Rich Walker had told me he would only serve on REALL's board for one year when he was elected in 1998. Unfortunately, unlike politicians, he stuck to his self-imposed term-limit and did not run again. David McMaster volunteered for one of the remaining at-large board positions (see his introduction, below), but we still have one position remaining if anybody is interested. Other than myself, the only person who stayed put was Steve Egger, as one of the at-large board members.

Wow! Well, I'd like to give my thanks to Derek and Rich for the work they did this past year! I'd like to further thank all the Board members who have jumped into various new positions. It should be a fun year!

In fact, I'd say this was one of our most productive meetings ever. Besides the elections, we had our attorney present information on REALL's incorporation as a non-profit organization. This is something we've been wanting to do since we formed REALL, and it is finally happening. This means that, among other things, once everything is final, you can deduct

money given to REALL (as membership, for example) from your taxes (as always, some restrictions apply, void where prohibited, your mileage may vary, etc.). Also, REALL will be able to make purchases without paying sales tax, which will help make your membership dollar go that much further for us.

We also discussed having a high school essay contest next year. At least one other local skeptics group has had this type of contest, and I think it is a great way to both help our educational goals and gain some publicity. We will be needing some people to work on this project, so feel free to volunteer! We're also looking for ideas on how to give a good prize, so if you know a business who would like to donate money as part of a prize, and get a little publicity as well, please pass along the information!

REALL E-mail List

Also at the May meeting, we discussed the REALL e-mail list that I set up. Basically, this list is for any announcements and discussion of topics related to REALL.

I've already sent out notices to everybody for whom I could find an e-mail address. So far, 11 people have joined. If you have not received such a notice, and you are a REALL member, you can join by sending an e-mail to reall-subscribe@topica.com (or by going to the Topica web site, www.topica.com, registering as a user, and doing a search for "REALL" to find the list – trust me, the e-mail way is easier).

So what will we use this list for? We can announce meetings, talk about topics of interest to skeptics, refer you to interesting web sites, etc. As events occur, this list will allow us to get information out to you faster.

So I hope you'll sign up and join in the discussion. See you there!

This Month

Don't forget, on **Saturday, June 12 at**

noon, we'll be playing **Skeptic Jeopardy** at Shakey's Pizza & Buffet!

As I described last month, this will be a full-participation event. We'll break up in teams, have some fun, and maybe learn a thing or two along the way! (Not to mention eating lunch, but remember that we each have to pay our own way.)

I have spent a fair amount of time making these answers and questions interesting and amusing, and I hope to see a lot of you there. I expect it to be a fun time and a good way to spend part of an afternoon!

New Board Member Introduction

David McMaster:

From birth, I was exposed to the technology/communications world, since both my parents were radio hams (Mom was in all likelihood the first female ham in Illinois) and worked for then-competing newspapers in Taylorville. This sort of environment nurtured an early appreciation for science and logical thought, and after a stint in the Air Force and college (simultaneously) in Mississippi in the '60's, ("may you live in interesting times" – and places) I enjoyed a career with Ameritech, mostly in the Engineering department. I retired from there, and spend my time with two businesses, one designing electronics/software (actually firmware), and the other designing and marketing equipment to the independent telecommunications industry. Both businesses are mostly work-at-home, thanks to computers. My interest in promoting critical thought has grown in proportion with the proliferation of junk "science," which is unfortunately often more entertaining to casual observers than the real stuff. ❖

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“hands of Christ.” Indeed, this second flyer went out of its way to push Reiki as a “complement” to both real medicine and “all spiritual belief systems.”

A third flyer said Reiki is “an ancient healing art that has been revived in this century.” Again, it mentioned nothing about any specific religion (just “spiritual”). And even though it is a “healing art,” practitioners do not actually heal, but let the body do the work.

A Reiki newsletter had an article claiming that “Science Measures the Human Energy Field.” Among the claims in this article were:

“In a few decades scientists have gone from a conviction that there is no such thing as an energy field around the human body, to an absolute certainty that it exists.”

“The picture that is emerging has the same scientific foundations that underlie modern clinical medicine.”

“[A researcher] discovered that a huge pulsating biomagnetic field emanated from the hands of a TT practitioner... The biomagnetic pulsations from the hands are in the same frequency range as brain waves.”

The authors cite supposed scientific articles, and even refer people to their own published articles, but when the reader gets to the end of this essay, they don’t find the list to check out, but rather the address of the authors. Hmmm.

A flyer on chiropractic (given away on the table with a Tarot reader) discussed “subluxations” and other unproven claims of what I would call the “bad” chiropractors (the ones who believe all disease stems from the spine – see also “REALLity Check,” this issue).

One company was selling a fruit and vegetable rinse that sounded like the miracle tonics that used to be sold out of the back of a wagon. You can use it to get rid of pesticides on vegetables, to heal warts and athletes foot, kill lice, and keep ticks off your pet. Truly an amazing product! And they had other products also – “whole foods” you can eat to “regenerate your body back to better health.” Because it’s a “whole food,” the woman hawking this line said I could even give it to an infant – I shiver to think that someone might actually follow this advice.

A flyer on Regenesis started by linking itself to Wilhelm Reich (who “discovered” orgone energy). Then it discussed the “process of mobilizing and directing the flow of cellular energy to stimulate, facilitate and accelerate the natural healing process of the human body... The source of healing energy in Regenesis is the energy used by the fetus to create itself.” In the “scary” category is the quote from another Regenesis flyer noting, “There are Continuing Education Units for RN’s and LVN’s from the California Board of Registered Nursing Provider No. 8725” for classes in this particular form of “healing.”

A local couple had a booth to present the therapy they discovered, called Chironomy. This technique, which is apparently somehow related to Reiki, helps “flush toxins and fat.” They also sold little plastic pieces they created to

One company was selling a fruit and vegetable rinse that sounded like the miracle tonics that used to be sold

tell the future; each has a picture representing one aspect of life on one side and is blank on the other, you ask a question and then toss them to get the answer. The woman also indicated, in conversation, that President Clinton uses Neuro-Linguistic Programming to cause the U.S. population to blame Congress instead of him for any problems.

And finally, what would a holistic health fair be without ear coning? Yes, that’s right – you stick a paper cone in your ear and light a candle in the cone to “help with a variety of problems related to the ears.” How do we know it works? Because when you’re done, you open the cone and find wax! Obviously, this came up from your ears, not down from the candle. Anybody who says otherwise must be one of those skeptics.

So what did I learn? Not a whole lot beyond what I already knew. No-

where was the voice of rationality to be found at this “health fair.” Instead, a wide variety of nonsense for up for sale, and the buyers were only too happy to oblige.

[David Bloomberg is the chairman of REALL.] ❖

Braun Update by David Bloomberg

A short update on the progression of the Bennett Braun case (see Vol. 6, #8, #9, #10, and Vol. 7, #2). The trial before an administrative judge was originally supposed to start in May. However, as indicated in a previous article, Thomas Glasgow, the lead prosecutor from the Illinois Department of Professional Regulation (IDPR), had said he wanted to push that back to the summer so the Braun children would not have to miss final exams.

A recent discussion with Tony Sanders of the IDPR’s public information office confirmed that the proceedings have been moved – but to November! Braun’s attorney has not provided necessary information, delaying the case.

Sanders said the related hearing for psychologist Roberta Sachs has not been scheduled yet, and, most surprisingly, he said that he thinks the case against Dr. Elva Poznanski, a child psychiatrist colleague of Dr. Braun’s, has been settled. Sanders was unable to fill in the details, but we should have them for the next issue. Glasgow will be providing more explanation shortly, but not in time for this issue of the newsletter. Look for that information here next month. ❖

REALLity Check

by David Bloomberg

Cleaned Out

Many of you have probably heard of “laundry balls” – little plastic balls that were supposed to replace detergent and magically clean your clothes by emitting negative charges to force dirt off the laundry (or some variant like that). They’ve been around for quite some time, and the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) finally got around to doing something about these claims.

The FTC has stopped two of these companies from making their claims, but the settlement reached did not, of course, require the firms to admit wrongdoing for their past claims. According to the AP Wire (4/23), the director of the FTC’s Bureau of Consumer Protection said tests showed the laundry balls “do little more than clean out your wallet” – not your clothes.

These things have been around for years now, and I just have to wonder what took the FTC so long to finally act. Sure, the companies have to stop making their claims now, but how much money have they made off of these things, which sold for up to \$75 each? Was it really that difficult to run a test of plain water vs. laundry balls vs. detergent? The answer, of course, is no – *Consumer Reports* tested these back in 1995 (and, not surprisingly, found they didn’t work). I think the FTC needs to clean up these things a bit faster in the future.

A Tale of Two Chiropractics

Money magazine had a surprisingly good article on chiropractic in May. I say it was surprisingly good because it went into a fair amount of detail that is most often left out of popular-press articles of this type.

For example, the author discusses the studies showing that physical therapy and a combination of rest and pain medicine plus exercise can be as effective

at treating back pain – at lower cost. The author also points out that there is “no conclusive clinical evidence that chiropractic helps chronic back pain,” which is one reason many people go to chiropractors.

Most importantly is the author’s dividing up of chiropractors into two groups. She notes that “Roughly 80% of chiropractors believe that spinal misalignment is a significant cause of disease,” and adds, “If yours endorses chiropractic’s use for nonmusculoskeletal problems, such as asthma (for which studies show it is *not* useful), or encourages you to think of him or her as a primary-care provider, you may want to

These things have been around for years now, and I just have to wonder what took the FTC so long to finally act. Was it really that difficult to run a test of plain water vs. laundry

choose someone else.” She also warns consumers away from chiropractors who want to prescribe herbs or homeopathic remedies.

The author also talks about “scientifically oriented chiropractors,” who treat only musculoskeletal conditions (she even gives a phone number and website to find these “good” types).

The article ends on a good note, explaining that medical experts (except most chiropractors, of course) do not recommend routine chiropractic visits as a way to prevent future problems. This means people should not have standing appointments with a chiropractor, and I hope that a few of the many people who have such scheduled visits read this article and think about

whether that type of chiropractic is all it’s cracked up to be.

Beyond Expectations

A *Chicago Tribune* article on the placebo effect in the “Tempo” section? (5/11) My immediate reaction was, “Uh oh.” As regular readers of this column know, the *Tribune* does not have a stellar record when it comes to these types of articles.

But, lo and behold, this time it was different! An intelligent article that discussed the placebo effect in detail, talking to all the right people, and pointing out all the right things. Amazing!

A psychiatrist explained that certain medical conditions, such as pain, depression, and panic attacks, are more responsive to placebo than, for example, bacterial infections. Considering that the placebo-responsive conditions tend to be more dependent on subjective interpretations of the patient, this makes a great deal of sense. As a psychology professor noted, “Placebo pain reduction depends on people expecting pain to be reduced.”

Some studies of the placebo effect have shown how effective it can be in these situations. However, many in the realm of alternative medicine have tended to miss this information, especially when they don’t do proper double-blind experiments.

One doctor noted, “Expectations play a role in the placebo effect. What people expect is going to happen to them often is what happens.” Well, I certainly never expected to see such a good article on the placebo effect in the “Tempo” section of the *Tribune*, but maybe I can hope a few of their other columnists who write about alternative medicine and the like for that publication pay at least a little attention to this information. ❖

A Daily Dose of Skepticism

by Wally Hartshorn

This article briefly summarizes the information I gave in a presentation at REALL's March 1999 meeting. There are a huge number of sites on the Internet, as everyone knows by now. In two earlier talks ("High Weirdness by Web" and "More High Weirdness by Web"), I discussed some of the numerous, well, weird web sites, promoting beliefs in alien abductions, Bigfoot, ghosts, astrology, tarot cards, and all manner of assorted nuttiness.

My favorite was a web site that claimed that a "sorcerer" would cast a spell for you over the Internet. Just send you credit card number and a description of the spell, and the magician would cast it for you. I'm thinking that's got to be just about the easiest way to make money yet invented!

However, there are also many sites providing good skeptical information. This article provides a brief summary of some of these.

Some Selected Web Sites

The Skeptic News

www.skepticnews.com

The Skeptic News, which I created in July 1998, receives about 300 visits per day. Nearly every day I post brief items highlighting new and updated information, located on other web sites, of interest to skeptics. This makes it easier for users to locate new information while it is still fresh, as well as providing an easy way for skeptic sites to publicize their activities. As a result of seeking information for this site daily, I've found a wide variety of "must see" skeptic web sites. Some of those are highlighted in this article.

General Skepticism

REALL

www.reall.org

In addition to the Skeptic News, I also am the webmaster for REALL's unofficial web site. (It isn't paid for from

REALL's funds and items that I post on it don't undergo any sort of approval process.) It receives about 85 visits per day. In addition to electronic versions of all issues of *The REALL News*, it is also used to post announcements about upcoming meetings and copies of letters REALL has sent to the news media.

CSICOP

www.csicop.org

The web site of the granddaddy of all skeptic groups is not as packed with information as I would have hoped. It is apparently a one-man operation run entirely by Patrick Fitzgerald. He's done a wonderful job on limited resources, and it is definitely a useful site. I just hope that CSICOP devotes more resources to the site in the future.

Skeptic Society

www.skeptic.com

The web site of the Skeptic Society is quite sparse, unfortunately. Like CSICOP, the Skeptic Society doesn't seem to be devoting as much attention to the Internet as I would have expected. However, you should keep it in your bookmarks, if only to see whether it becomes more active in the future.

James Randi Educational Foundation

www.randi.org

The youngest of the "Big Three" national skeptics group, Randi's web site is also rather limited. It has more info than the Skeptic Society site, less than CSICOP's. However, Randi recently mentioned that the web site is undergoing a renovation, so hopefully the JREF will soon place more emphasis on the Internet.

So, if the Big Three have web sites that are somewhat disappointing, does that mean there is little good information on the web for skeptics? Not at all! The web sites of less well-known folks make up for any current lacking of the Big Three.

Skeptic's Dictionary

skepdic.com

Bob Carroll's web site is probably the single best source of skeptic reference information on the web. For just about any conceivable skeptic topic, you can find an entry discussing it. Rather than just a brief definition, he generally has written an article providing an overview of the topic, with links to additional information. If you visit only one site, visit this one.

Australian Skeptics

www.skeptics.com.au

The U.S. isn't the only country with national skeptic groups. There are numerous others. Of the ones that I can actually read (an important consideration), this is easily the best.

Skeptic Friends Network

www.skepticfriends.org

Take a few friends who are skeptics. Add plenty of humor. Give them a web site to play with. Stand back and watch.

Newsletters & Reports

I particularly like web sites that post selected articles, or better yet entire issues, from their group's newsletter. Here are a few newsletters that you can find online.

The REALL News

www.reall.org/newsletter

The newsletter of the Rational Examination Association of Lincoln Land. (But you knew that already, didn't you?)

The WHY-Files

www.rpi.edu/~sofkam/ISUNY

The newsletter of the Inquiring Skeptics of Upper New York.

Tampa Bay Skeptics Report

members.aol.com/tbayskept

The newsletter of the Tampa Bay Skeptics.

Doubting Thomas

members.aol.com/doubtthommy

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The newsletter of the Sagan Society of the University of Georgia.

Condon Report

www.ncas.org/condon

This is the complete text of the famous Condon Report reporting on their findings in investigating UFOs. The National Capitol Area Skeptics converted the entire thing for the web. What a treat!

Creation/Evolution

National Center for Science Education

www.natcensci.ed.org

The NCSE's web site has some useful information, but is still relatively limited. There seems to be an inverse correlation at work. The more active an organization is offline, the less active it is online!

Talk.Origins Archive

www.talkorigins.org

This is an absolute gold mine of information about the creation/evolution controversy! Tons of information!

Secular Web

www.infidels.org

This very active site of the Internet Infidels are primarily interested in atheism and church-state separation. However, they also have some good information about creation/evolution, faith healing, and similar topics.

False Memory Syndrome

False Memory Syndrome Foundation

www.fmsfonline.org

This site was created primarily to cover a recent FMS-related trial in Houston. Now that the trial is over, I'm hoping it will provide more general FMS information.

Stop Bad Therapy

www.stopbadtherapy.com

Plenty of information about FMS from someone terribly injured by it.

Alternative Medicine

Quackwatch

www.quackwatch.com

Dr. Stephen Barrett's site is a treasure trove of information about all manner of questionable medical practices, and it's updated regularly. This is one of my favorites.

Chirobase

www.chirobase.com

Dr. Barrett also helps run this site, which is similar to QuackWatch, but with an emphasis on chiropractic.

National Council Against Health Fraud

www.ncahf.org

Includes issues of their newsletter dating back to 1993.

Health Care Reality Check

www.hcrc.org

Includes the journal *Scientific Review of Alternative Medicine*.

Cults

FactNet

www.factnet.org

Daily news items about many cults, with an emphasis on Scientology.

Operation Clambake

www.xenu.net

This site has plenty of information about Scientology, particularly the alt. religion.scientology Week in Review.

Miscellaneous

Urban Legends Reference Pages

www.snopes.com

Don't forward that chain letter or repeat that rumor until you've checked

this site! An essential reference if you don't want to look foolish.

Lists of Links

Need more sites? Visit any of these (ignoring the line breaks in the addresses) and go exploring!

Skeptic News

www.skepticnews.com/links.html

Jim Lippard's List

www.primenet.com/~lippard/skeptical.html

Skeptic Ring

www.webring.org/cgi-bin/webring?ring=skeptic;home
(or via www.skepticnews.com)

Skeptical Links Project

www.ozemail.com.au/~contact/links/slnkindx.htm
(or via www.skeptics.com.au)

And finally....

Studmuffins of Skepticism

www.gebesse.com.au/studmuffins

SkepChicks '99 Calendar

members.xoom.com/dwpalmer/sccal/skepchicks.htm

Are you curious about what some of these people look like? Here's your opportunity to find out!❖

A Nod to Our Patrons

REALL would like to thank our patron members. Through their extra generosity, REALL is able to continue to grow as a force for critical thinking in Central Illinois. To become a patron member of REALL, please use the membership form in insert. Patron members are:

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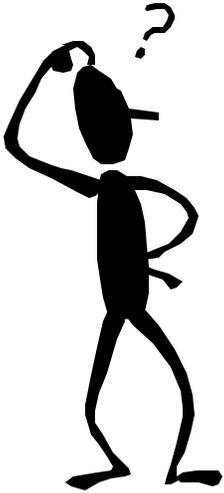
Bill Mellon, Valparaiso, Indiana

James Rosenthal, Springfield

Doug Smith, Springfield

Richard Walker, Springfield

Our Next Meeting Skeptic Jeopardy!



Join us for a change of pace as we enjoy some good food while testing our knowledge of skeptic facts and trivia. We'll split up into teams, hands on buzzers, and show what we know! And if you feel you don't know enough, here's a fun way to learn more! It's BYOLM (Bring Your Own Lunch Money), but the fun is free!

Note the Special
Date, Time, and Location!

Saturday, June 12, Noon
Shakey's Pizza & Buffet
2441 S. MacArthur Blvd.
Springfield, Illinois



Free and Open
to the Public

www.reall.org

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