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

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Creationist Speaks at Lincoln Library

by Clark Olson

reationist John Henry, a Lincoln Land Community College math teacher, spoke on the "unscientific nature" of evolution studies to a packed house of about 100 people, including many junior high and high school students, on December 10 at the Lincoln Library. Apparently the audience included many of his supporters, but also included Malcolm Levin's class and others. It was really hard to tell who was who. He was introduced by a man who did not identify himself but



could have been from the creation club at Lincoln Land. The introduction noted that Henry is a mathematician, teacher, former government worker and Department of Defense cryptologist, and Wheaton College graduate. It was also requested that the talk of 80 minutes not be interrupted and that questions

be kept until afterward. [Chairman's Note: Recall that Mr. Henry repeatedly interrupted Malcolm Levin at his REALL talk a short while ago.—D.B.]

Henry started the talk by saying REALL wouldn't let him talk at a REALL meeting (but said nothing about the offer to print his article in the newsletter, where it could be properly analyzed). He claimed he was a skeptic, was skeptical of paranormal phenomena and also wanted to be skeptical about evolution studies. The talk was framed around five criteria of pseudoscience, which he said he took from REALL's web site (see below-it's from an article, "The Five Laws of Quack Science," by Roy Auerbach from the Association for Rational Thought, the Cincinnati skeptics group). These criteria were discussed one at a time with examples of studies used to support evolution followed by scorn and derision and plain denial that they had any relevance. He also described foibles of evolution scientists by using their own words against them. Of course, any time he brought in references to creation "scientists" he used words of approval. Thus the talk was not organized as a point-by-point discussion of the various kinds of evidence for evolution from different areas of science: dating, geology, fossil record, systematics, genetics, physiology, etc.

At the end, he felt confident enough to conclude that evolution studies were not science and should be considered some

sort of religion and that the theory of evolution must be taken on faith. He further concluded in the discussion period that either creationism should be given equal time or both should be left out of school curriculum until college!

The performance was enthusiastic and slick with good graphics. He expressed a sort of embracing good humor to the audience – of course, evolution supporters probably did not feel very warm and fuzzy, but there was a feeling that his supporters did. In other words, some people were probably bamboozled!

Here are the five ways of knowing one is dealing with pseudoscience

- 1) "Thinking big; is the idea grandiose?" His answer was that it is obvious and I guess I'd have to agree—it is a big unifying theory; so is the theory of gravitation and plate tectonics.
- 2) Think difficult. I think his point here was about presenting one explanation as being difficult to understand, ab-

struse, only for the initiated, so he said yes, I guess. But the discussion was about studies/observations used to present evolutionary science: antibiotic resistance; insecticide resistance; beaks of Galapagos finches; some fruit fly studies; he dismisses these studies, which



show small changes accumulating over time, as not proving much; unscientific extrapolation; triviality; oscillations of quantitative characteristics.

Actually, what the article said as far as "thinking difficult" was: "The laws of a quack science are usually claimed to be very difficult to verify. Some researchers may be able to detect the effect, others are not. The effect appears to be sporadic for undetermined reasons. Equipment that detects the effect reliably seems to be hard to come by. The claim is often made that the effect is just beyond the reach of current scientific technol-

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Purpose

The Rational Examination Association of Lincoln Land is a non-profit, tax-exempt 501(c)(3) 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.

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REALL Contacts

REALL Hotline	217-726-5354
Chairman, David Bloomberg	chairman@reall.org
Editor, Wally Hartshorn	editor@reall.org
Web Site	www.reall.org

From the Chairman

David Bloomberg

s we enter REALL's 10th year, we are still faced with the same issues that were around when we began. It may seem like we haven't made much headway – indeed, perhaps it seems that we've lost ground. But everything goes in cycles. Today *Sightings* and *Unsolved Mysteries* aren't on the air, but John Edward is and James Van Praagh (and probably others) soon will be as well. The public will eventually tire of them and move on to something else.

Meanwhile, creationism continues to rear its ugly head as well. New people come along to raise the same old tired—and repeatedly debunked—arguments. They change the name (it's not "creationism" anymore, it's "intelligent design") but still don't have the science.

These two topics are both covered in articles this month. First, as I expect you've already seen (most people don't skip the front page so they can run to the Chairman's column), Clark Olson summarizes creationist John Henry's talk at the Lincoln Library in December. Some of you may remember Henry, who attended a few REALL meetings and, along with a fellow Lincoln Land Community College math teacher/creationist, managed to do a good job disrupting Malcolm Levin's talk earlier this year. After that incident, Henry offered to speak at a RE-ALL meeting, and the Board turned him down. We did not want to give him a podium to use for his anti-scientific claims. We did, however, offer him space in this newsletter to put together some of his best attacks against evolution (which he claims is not science). We let him know that his article would run, unedited, but would be followed by a review that points out any flaws in his arguments. He turned us down. Now why would he do that? He claimed he had all this information to pass along to our members, but when he was given the chance to do it, he refused.

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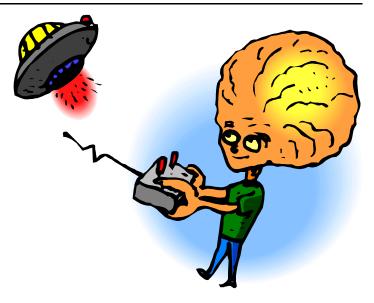
Why? Because he doesn't want to put something down on paper where it can be analyzed. He doesn't want to give up control of the situation. This is a standard pseudoscientific way of doing things. In fact, I recall back when REALL was just starting and Bob Ladendorf and I attended a UFO lecture. The presenter used a rapid-fire approach and didn't take questions until the end. Then, if there was a question he didn't want to answer because it was too logical or rational, he gave some quick response that didn't address it, and moved on to somebody else. Clark's description of John Henry's talk sounds awfully familiar in this regard.

Speaking of similarities in seemingly different types of pseudoscience, let me also share a comment Henry made after my talk on psychic parasites. He told me he liked the talk and then asked me how people can continue to believe in psychics even with so much evidence showing that they are wrong. I replied that it was the will to believe. At the time, I didn't feel like getting into a protracted argument with him, so I just left it at that. But I was thinking to myself that here is a man who refuses to believe the scientific evidence of biology, genetics, astronomy, geology, and other branches, and has the gall to criticize believers in psychics for refusing to accept evidence! He was certainly right, but he needs to look in a mirror and realize that the will to believe does not only apply to them, but also to him. He wants to believe in the literal six-day creation. Therefore, he refuses to accept any evidence to the contrary. That's not the way science works. This leads us to our January meeting.

January Meeting

The first Tuesday in January is New Year's Day, and the Library is closed, so we will instead be meeting a week later on Tuesday, January 8. At the December meeting I mentioned that it would be about the human genome project, but our speaker had a conflict come up and so we've had to postpone that one.

Instead, the topic will be one sparked by John Henry's talk and Clark Olson's interest in the topic. Specifically, Henry has indicated that he wants to hold his talks regularly and perhaps even form an organization to promote creationism here in



Springfield. The question has arisen: What should/can we do about this? Certainly we would never do anything to try to censor him or his fellow creationists, but we need to be able to point out the flaws in his arguments and rebut his claims. If he can draw close to 100 people to his presentations while we draw around 20, there is a problem.

Since we changed the meeting date and topic, we figured we might as well change the *place*, too. Instead of meeting at the library, we will meet directly to the West of it, at the 1st Presbyterian Church (321 S. 7th, where Lincoln's Pew is—mention "Clark's group" when you enter and you'll be directed to the room).

This will not be a lecture meeting, but one of discussion where we *need* your input. If REALL is to do anything constructive, we need some involvement at least in the ideas department. We are going to try to bring in a few outside people who will also be able to contribute, and if you know of anybody (whether a professor, a priest, or just an interested friend), please feel free to bring them along. I know I always end these columns by saying I hope to see a lot of you at the meeting, but this time, we need to see a lot of you there. \P



Psychic Parasite Update

by David Bloomberg

n recent issues of this newsletter, I have discussed some of the people who I term "psychic parasites" – those who claim to have psychic powers and prey off of victims, most notably the victims of the September 11 attacks.

I have previously addressed Sylvia Browne and John Edward, but there are others. I discussed these in the December meeting, but for those of you who might have missed it (and if you did, you missed a good meeting), here is some of what I talked about.

The Psychic Twins

The Jamison sisters came to my attention because they made predictions for a *TV Guide* article on the new season (which was also discussed in this newsletter). This issue hit the

stands only a few days before the attacks, yet none of the four "psychics" included any predictions that involved the biggest TV news—not to mention that it postponed the start of the very Fall series they were supposed to be predicting. Among the predictions they made in that article were that Jason Alexander's new show would be brilliantly funny; in fact, it was just canceled after only a few episodes for being quite the opposite.

When I went to their website to look further, I found that they were claiming they had specifically predicted the World Trade

Center attack on Art Bell's radio show a couple years ago. Intrigued, I e-mailed to ask for details. They sent some information plus a CD with portions of their discussion with Bell. They claimed these portions showed they had correctly predicted various things, including the WTC attack, the election of Bush, and Y2K being a non-event.

But what struck me about their mailing was not the CD, but a full color glossy page showing their photo superimposed over the World Trade Center with one tower already aflame and the second plane just feet away from the other tower. The large bold text shouted that they had predicted it! I do not believe I have seen anything so incredibly low-class in my entire life. It's simply not possible to do it justice here with words (that'll teach you to miss a meeting!)

Trying to put that aside, I listened to the CD. Keep in mind that they only copied five minutes of their entire time on the show, so we have no idea what else they might have said that wasn't even close to coming true—not to mention the thousands of other predictions they might have tossed out on other shows. Even so, we see that their claims to having predicted this attack simply are not true.

They were asked about coming disasters, both natural and

not. They responded with the following (it was never clear which twin was speaking because they both sound alike and one would pick up a sentence where the other left off):

"We are seeing terrorist attacks on federal government—excuse me, federal buildings. Particularly South Carolina or Georgia, by July 2002. And also the New York Trade Center—the World Trade Center in 2002, with something, with a terrorist attack."

So, did they mention terrorist attacks? Yes. Did they mention the World Trade Center? Yes. But they still got it wrong. There were no attacks in South Carolina or Georgia—the only federal building hit was the Pentagon, and the Twins didn't get that one. They predicted the federal attacks by 2002, but pre-

dicted the World Trade Center attack in 2002. So they got the place wrong in one portion and the date wrong in the other. Plus, since the World Trade Center was already the target of a mostly-failed attack once, throwing it out as a potential target for another one is not exactly a great leap. All told, we can see that their claim to have predicted this attack is simply not correct.

Let's look at a couple of the other claims as a side note. They predicted that Y2K would be a non-event. Maybe this was an amazing thing to say on Art

Bell's show, but by November 1999

(which is when this interview took place), most sane people already realized this. It was not exactly a tough prediction to make.

Another prediction they made said, "We're seeing school shootings, December '99 in Washington." They also took credit for this, noting in another enclosed "ad" that "the Seattle shooting ... occurred six hours after the show aired." They seem to neglect the fact that this would mean it happened in November, not December as they had predicted. They couldn't even tell that something was only six hours away? Again, they took credit where none was due.

They also predicted Bush's election. Let's look at the actual discussion:

Q: "Do y'all know who the next president might be?"

Art: "The presidential elections are looming ahead. They may be a crashing bore. Actually, that's what I think they're going to be, is a crashing bore."

Twins: Laugh.

Art: Do you know the outcome?

Twins: "I think Bush is going to win. We both do."

So they "think" Bush would win. OK, they had a 50/50 shot. But the real thing to look at here is that Bell characterized the race as probably being "a crashing bore." I think that the end of that race could be characterized by a lot of terms, but "crashing bore" is definitely not one of them. Yet the twins made no comment whatsoever. Why not? Because, of course, nobody predicted this incredible occurrence, just as nobody predicted the terrorist attacks.

Let's ask one more question. Just how psychic are the Twins? Where did I get the information I've used here to point out their failed predictions? I got it from the Twins themselves. Didn't they know why it would be used? No bad vibes from the evil skeptic? Hmmm.

The fact of the matter is that they provides zero evidence that they are actually "psychic." Yet that doesn't stop them from promoting themselves by using the deaths of thousands

James Van Praagh

For a while I was wondering where James Van Praagh was in all of this. But just when I thought he might actually have been one of the very few to not claim credit for predicting the attacks, he popped back onto my radar screen.

Van Praagh preceded both Edward and Browne in the "medium" game, getting famous with several books, including Reaching to Heaven, where he claims to talk to the dead as Edward does.

He has a new book out, Heaven and Earth: Making the Psychic Connection, and of course needs to promote it. So it wasn't surprising to find that he was interviewed by Entertainment Tonight. The online interview from November 9 talks about his new book, his new show coming up (as if Edward's wasn't bad enough), his claim that many actors are psychic, etc. One thing he discusses is a reading he did on Bonnie Bakely-Robert Blake's wife who was murdered. He gives the standard nonsense about reading things only certain people would know, but when asked specifically if she said who killed her, Van Praagh says, "She gave me several different situations..." Excuse me? You'd think the woman could say who killed her if, of course, he is actually speaking to her. What's this "different situations" baloney?

Anyway, he has not done as much with September 11 as others, but he's still trying to use it to promote himself. In the interview, he claims he had a premonition last November that there was going to be a war on our soil. He says he had a vision of glass flying and smoke, and knew it would be on the East Coast and near water (I had to laugh at the "near water" reference, since that is perhaps the most frequently

used statement in "psychic" predictions). Of course, we have no actual evidence for this premonition, since he didn't talk about it until after September 11. That doesn't stop him from mentioning it and knowing that the True Believers won't question it, and those who don't believe weren't going to buy his book anyway. And Heaven forbid the interviewer should ask a real question to look into it more deeply.

FBI Using Psychics, Or Psychics Using FBI?

The Times of London says Prudence Calabrese has claimed her "remote viewing" firm has been hired to figure out where the terrorists will strike next ("remote viewing" is an attempt to find a classier name for "psychic"). Their first guess was a bowl game. Wow, she must be psychic. Certainly nobody else could have figured out that a terrorist might target a sporting activity where there are lots of people around!

The question that has been brought up a few times when I've told this story is why Ms. Calabrese would be telling the world about this. I mean, it seems to me that a key point of counter-terrorism is secrecy. Yet here she is, blabbing to the newspaper. It has to make ya wonder if the FBI is really using her, or she is using the FBI (and, of course, the deaths of thousands of people) to try to promote herself.

Conclusions

There are many more examples where these came from. It seems that just about every self-proclaimed seer has tried to somehow claim credit for foreseeing the September 11 attacks. Yet with all this vast psychic power flying around, nobody actually did anything about it. It's enough to make you wonder just what psychic power is good for, if you can foresee events but can't save the lives of thousands of people.

A few people have asked me why I chose to call them "psychic parasites." So allow me to quote the definition of "parasite" from Webster's New World Dictionary: "a person who lives at the expense of another or others without making any useful contribution or return." If that doesn't describe these "psychics," I don't know what does. They prey on the emotions—fear, grief, etc.—and on the blood of those victimized by the September 11 tragedy, and indeed by all tragedies. They sell their false visions to a public that is all-toowilling to believe.

Overall, they have all acted exactly as I expected they would. Nobody has shown any actual evidence for correctly predicting the attacks. They have

shown, however, that they are nothing more than psychic parasites. $\ensuremath{\bullet}$

Looking at the Border Between Science and Nonscience

by David Bloomberg

Michael Shermer has made a living out of being skeptical of all things on the fringe. He founded the Skeptics Society, publishes *Skeptic* magazine, and has written books taking critical looks at both scientific and historical problems with the paranormal and even Holocaust deniers.

Most recently he turned his attention a bit more towards the mainstream, penning *The Borderlands of Science: Where Sense Meets Nonsense* (Oxford University Press, \$25).

While this volume still addresses some of the more bizarre claims he has encountered, much of it focuses on that area closer to the "boundary" of real science. In doing so, he discusses issues that most people probably see as a bit more serious than whether psychics really have ESP or UFOs actually abduct people.

These boundary issues include human cloning, the debate over whether nature or nurture impacts more on a young person, and the question of whether a person's race predetermines that he or she may be better in given areas than others.

Even the serious includes some insanity, such as the many crank "Theories of Everything" Shermer has seen, some of the most amusing of which he recounts for the reader. He also uses his experiences with "remote viewing" (a term for a supposed type of psychic power) to explain the difference between real science and nonscience. He goes from there to examine the area where these two categories almost overlap—the borderlands.

As in previous books, Shermer explains that science is "the best knowledge filter ever invented." In other words, the methods of science were designed to help avoid errors in thinking. While certainly mistakes are made along the way, the self-correcting mechanism of that same scientific process eventually roots these out.

Within several chapters of his discussion, Shermer notes that great scientists are not immune from falling for pseudoscientific ideas. As one example, Shermer thoroughly details some of the beliefs of Alfred Russel Wallace, who co-discovered evolution with Charles Darwin. As Shermer notes, Wallace was honest, passionate, and considered one of the greatest scientists of his time. Yet he held and promoted unscientific beliefs in spiritualism; Shermer examines these beliefs and how he came by them in great, and interesting, detail.

He also looks at Carl Sagan, a scientist who often walked the fine line between orthodoxy and heresy. But while Sagan may have held some strange notions, he always came back to the science, and indeed one of his final books, *The Demon-* Haunted World, emphasized that point at great length.

But if science is so great, what about scientific hoaxes like the Piltdown man? Piltdown was put forth in 1912 as an alleged pre-human fossil that supported the views of scientists at the time. However, in 1953 it was proven that Piltdown man was a hoax of epic proportions—the bones were modern and had merely been made to look ancient. New dating techniques caught the hoax.

Shermer tackles such instances head-on. While this particular incident was resolved five decades ago, creationists are still fond of bringing it up as a supposed failure of the scientific method. Quite the contrary, says Shermer. This shows

how science refused to simply accept what was put forth and, instead, the self-correcting methods found the forgery.

He also uses this as an opportunity to discuss how evolution, in particular, and science, in general, are supported not by a single piece of evidence, but by "a convergence of evidence." This is a point that Shermer had made in his previous book about Holocaust deniers, and it fits well into both discussions. Evidence—whether for a historical event or a scientific theory—builds around the facts that are known.

Just as a single brick does not hold up an

entire building, neither does a single fact hold up all of a complex scientific theories.

That is not to say that there is no way to disprove a theory once it has been built up, but those seeking to do so must provide the proper evidence. Pointing to a single decades-old hoax, as is sometimes done with Piltdown man, simply does not cut it.

The same can be said of all the "borderlands" topics. Even topics such as superstring theory or the inflationary theory of the universe (that it quickly expanded after the Big Bang), which are often discussed by serious physicists rather than a bunch of crackpots, have to prove themselves before they can be considered "normal science." Someday soon, evidence might be found to either prove or disprove these, and other similar ideas. Until that time, they remain on the borderlands of science. Shermer's book does an excellent job of examining this realm between science and nonscience.

[This review originally appeared in the State Journal-Register and is reprinted by permission of the author.]

("Creationist Speaks" continued from page 1)

ogy." In addition, the article notes: "The laws proposed by quack science may be difficult to verify for other reasons—equipment may be unavailable for inspection, procedures may be unobservable, raw data may be missing, and summary data may not be published in a usable form." Of course, none of these apply to evolution, though many *do* apply to creationism. Needless to say, he didn't address that part.

- 3) Next was the "Rule of Paranoia." "Does the atmosphere around the presentation of the idea involve a feeling of paranoia and hysteria?" He thinks so. He used criticism of Kansas actions (in a handout) and random statements of Dawkins and Eldridge. The actual article noted: "Often the quack scientist views himself or herself as brilliant, which may explain the characteristic tendency to take on the giants of science like Einstein. They are also likely to view themselves as victims of persecution. Fellow scientists are seen as dishonest blockheads who reject the quack scientist's papers, grant applications, and requests for promotion. Huge organizations—the government, business, the 'Eastern Establishment,' the Trilateral Commission—repress his work." Again, this does not apply to evolution, but does apply to people like John Henry. Here is a math teacher attacking all of biology, geography, astronomy, genetics, and various other sciences.
- 4) "Does the presenter of the idea allow no criticism?" As examples he used the NAS teachers guidebook, PBS evolution show (handout), etc. While it would be interesting to look at these in more detail, he again is pointing his criticism in the wrong direction. As the article notes: "A typical maneuver is to release the astounding findings to the press before they are available to the scientific community in standard refereed journals. The refereed journals may be passed over in favor of self-publication, where no hyper-critical fellow researchers can slow the flow of information by objecting to the methods used." One might point out that a typical maneuver might also be refusing to write an article for a newsletter that the author knows can be closely examined, but instead having a public presentation where such claims cannot so easily be investigated. Certainly, Mr. Henry wouldn't want that.
- 5) The final characteristic is that the quack scientist is typically the "Lonely hero of the lab." He flipped this around somehow. I didn't understand what he was up to in this point, but he went on to talk about the increasing numbers of people supporting creation, as mentioned below. As mentioned in the article, "Scientific advances normally are produced through a social process that involves communities of scientists over time—new findings are often not unexpected and are usually compatible with earlier work. The quack scientific discovery, however, is likely to arrive out of the blue, unsupported by previous research. The isolation of the work is often apparent in the exclusive lingo used to clothe the research—terminology unheard of in mainstream science." Again, this describes creationism, not evolution. How many different terms have they come up with to hide the lack of science? We've had creationism, creation science, intelligent design, etc.

I got up fairly quickly at his conclusion and mentioned that

there was a review of Icons of Evolution in Bioscience, including a web site that reviewed it chapter by chapter. One of his instances of putting down evolutionists was to dismiss Coyne's review in Nature, which he thought was unfair since it only covered a couple points. My suggestion that the Bioscience review would be more complete was brushed off. I then asked him what alternative explanation of biodiversity and the fossil record he favored. He was noticeably evasive but with some more pressing he finally admitted that he believed, by faith, in a six-day creation episode (where each day was literally 24-hours long) that occurred some six-to-ten thousand years ago. There were then a few very brief comments back and forth with another person about the nature of Genesis and then the questions became sort of random and difficult to describe. He was, of course, in control of the flow of the questions, so it was not possible to carry through with a debate. Additionally, during the questioning it came out that he didn't believe in dating techniques because of some private knowledge he had about assumptions made in the technique of dating, which he did not explain.

He had some additional information that was unfamiliar to me. He had some kind of statement signed by about 100 scientists saying there are big problems with evolution. (Who were the scientists? What were their credentials? I could-

n't say.) He had a private poll he had made around town of professional people and had gotten several dozen people to sign a creationist statement, including doctors, nurses, engineers, and mathematicians. He admitted this was just a casual study, but to me the backgrounds of these people were interesting. His conclusion from these and other findings is that creationism is on the rise and "evolutionism" is on the decline. [And the south will rise again!]

He put out a sign up sheet for people interested in pursuing these issues at further gatherings. He said he would like to give another talk specifically on "intelligent design" next year.

I'd like to be generous and believe that he is sincere but his attitude was off-putting, so I sway back and forth from thinking it would be better to ignore him but on the other hand trying to think of a format to engage him before an audience. I'm afraid we need to seriously engage him in some way because he seems to be energetic, committed, and effective at reaching people and getting them out. Any further involvement with him would have to involve several different specialists including ministers/priests/rabbis and some control of the proceedings. I think a "discovery" process like they use in court cases would be a good thing in trying to set up something, but he would of course have to agree to it first.

So what, if anything, do we do about people like John Henry? That will be the main topic of discussion for the January 8 meeting.

[Mike Henebry and Barb Olson helped in the preparation of this article.] \blacksquare

Our Next Meeting

Responding to Springfield's Creationists

Special Dation A creationism club is being formed in Springfield and a recent creationist talk at Lincoln Library drew 100 people. What should REALL do to prepare to respond to the creationists? Please join us for this very important discussion. (Note that this meeting will be held on a different date and location than our regular meetings.)

> Springfield, Illinois First Presbyterian Church (7th & Capitol) Tuesday, January 8, 7:00 PM

www.reall.org

Rational Examination Association of Lincoln Land (REALL) P.O. Box 20302 Springfield IL 62708