



The “Bright” Phenomenon.

Back in 2003 I attended and spoke at a conference held in Clearwater, Florida; Richard Dawkins was also in attendance, and it was then that I was first informed of the founding of a new group that called itself The Bright Movement. It was cofounded by Paul Geisert and Mynga Futrell. I agreed to be one of the first signers-on, though from the very start, I felt that the term “Bright,” which Paul had coined, would be offensive to many. That proved quite correct. A Bright – the term applied to a member of the group – is defined as “an individual whose worldview is in every respect naturalistic – free from supernatural and mystical elements.”

Now, try as I might, I couldn’t improve on the term. It was obvious that a person answering to “Bright” would be said to have the opinion that he/she was smarter – brighter – than others, and though that might be true, it would also look presumptuous and pompous as an adopted attitude. I’ve always chafed at another recently-coined term, the designation of a homosexual as a Gay. I know quite a number of these folks, and my observations lead me to say that – certainly – not all of them are happy or celebrating.

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Words from Randi



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Mr. Randi and colleagues:

Thank you for all your hard work. I am so glad that you exist. After reading your archives, I realize how many charlatans and conmen there are out there, bilking people who need to believe in something, out of their hard earned money. Please, though at times you must get discouraged, keep up the good work you are doing. There needs to be a candle in the darkness and you, sir, are that.

I recently have become an assistant Cub master for my sons Boy Scout troop, and I am going to suggest having a talk about rational thinking. I would like to ask your opinion - what do you think would be a good subject to show these young lads? I was thinking along the lines of asking questions like "Do you believe in ghosts?" then stating that there has never been any proof in the hundreds of years of ghost hunting, for the existence of ghosts.

I'd follow up by the same question regarding UFOs. However, I'm not sure how kids would react to that. Given your experience, I would like to know what you think would be the most effective subject for kids age 7-13. Perhaps you have an already written article for younger kids?

Any ideas would be greatly appreciated.

- Matt Fleming

*The JREF Replies: Matt, thanks very much for the kind words. My suggestion for you would be to teach the kids how easy it is to be fooled. I'd do the pendulum test to exhibit the ideomotor response. (Yes, sounds heavy, but it isn't.) Take one boy, and have him leave the room so he can't hear what's going on. Take a pendulum, and give it to one of the remaining boys. Tell them that this pendulum can detect whether someone is right handed or left handed. Tell them it will move in a circle over the hand that is favored, and in a line over the hand that isn't. Then have each boy come up, tell the pendulum boy which hand he uses, and then let him be tested. You'll be amazed... it works.

Now bring the other boy in, and give him the OPPOSITE instructions. Amazingly, it will work like that now! How is this possible? Because the boy is making it move. He gets the idea that it should move in a circle over the right hand, and as soon as it starts moving, he unconsciously makes it keep moving that way.

As a final test, have a blindfolded boy hold the pendulum. You'll find that it doesn't move in any predictable fashion at all. This should give the boys lots to think about!

- Jeff Wagg

What Do Skeptics Believe?

I have compiled a list of what all True Skeptics believe. Here it is:

- ESP, including spoon bending, is fake
- There are no bigfoots, chupacabras, sea monsters, or other hidden beasties
- There is no life after death, talking to the dead, reincarnation, or ghosts
- UFOs are not visitors from other worlds
- Alternative medicine doesn't help, and may actually kill you
- Religion is bunk
- Conspiracy theories are always wrong
- Dowsing is just people fooling themselves
- Faith healers are all charlatans
- Evolution definitively explains human origins

An easy list, yes? So, how did you do? Do your beliefs fall in line? If so, I have news for you.. you are not thinking skeptically. Sorry, not one of those statements is skeptical. They are positive statements of fact, based on authority rather than evidence. We don't actually know if any of them are true, and we probably never will.

Don't get me wrong; it certainly looks as though the bullet points are accurate. I don't expect to find a bigfoot in my back yard or to be cured b y homeopathy. But I have to hold out the possibility that these things could be real.

Sure, many skeptics believe similar things. There are common conclusions to the evidence we have, and it's easy to just go along and believe what we're told rather than do the work ourselves. But if we do that too much, there's another thing we are: fundamentalists. We must remember to focus on the "thinking" part of critical thinking at least as much if not more than the "critical" part.

The giant panda provides an interesting example for skeptics. A hundred twenty years ago, people read stories of a fantastic cat-like

bear with bold coloring that lived in the bamboo forests of China. Like bigfoot and the chupacabra, sightings were dismissed. The 1800s were full of falsified reports of dragons, man-eating plants, and other mythologies, so there was reason to think that the panda was one of these. A skin was brought in for examination and was considered a fake. Eventually, a live specimen was captured and science accepted the creature as real. Just because it's hard to believe, and there's precedence for fakery, doesn't mean a report or claim isn't accurate.



Disbelief is fine, and even advisable, but one must hold out the possibility that new evidence will be presented. In the case of the panda, that's exactly what happened; until sufficient proof was provided, the animal was assumed not to exist. But the fact that it *does* exist shows us that we can never be sure. Those scientists who thought the panda skin was fake were, quite simply, wrong. Had they been less sure of themselves, they might have recognized the skin as proof of a real animal. If they had already concluded that the animal was fictional, they would have had a hard time examining the evidence properly.

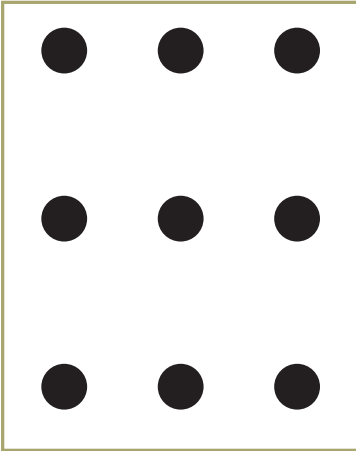
So I don't expect Nessie to be found or to have my chakras aligned or a visit from aliens. But there is the possibility, however slight, that these things will happen. And what makes me a skeptic is not my disbelief, but my willingness to always reconsider my conclusions when new evidence is presented.

There are no "True Skeptics." There is no code of belief, no catechism and no creed. You are a skeptic if you try to base your beliefs on evidence and are willing to reconsider them based on new evidence. That's it. We should expect to disagree with one another often.

If you disagree with me, please drop me a line at jeff@randi.org.

- Jeff Wagg

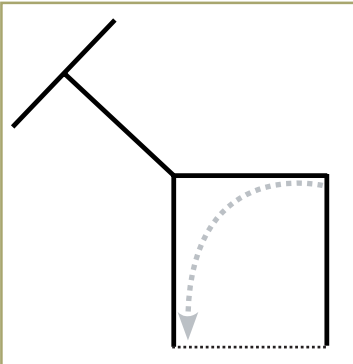
New Puzzle



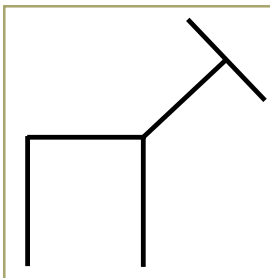
Instructions: Without lifting your pen, draw three straight lines that pass through each of the nine dots only once.

Hint: There are no other rules.

Solution for Giraffe Puzzle



1. Take the giraffe's back leg (one on the right) and drop it towards the front leg.
2. Rotate the entire drawing clockwise 90 degrees.
3. You've solved the puzzle. The Giraffe now faces the opposite direction



Here is how the giraffe will appear once you've rotated it clockwise 90 degrees.

We've run across some very odd claims of the paranormal here at the JREF. From the man who claimed he could detect store-bought eggs "screaming," to the man who thought meditation allowed him to time travel, we thought we'd seen everything. Then came Rosemary Hunter.

Rosemary claimed that she had received gifts from God that allowed her to control another person's bodily functions. Our research assistant Alison Smith worked with Rosemary, who was always very polite, to determine which bodily function we should test. Laughter and crying were out, as we know people can influence them. Inflicting pain has some ethical and measurement problems. Then Rosemary mentioned that she could cause someone to lose control of their bladder. Not only that, she could have God create urine instantly, so the test subject could start with an empty bladder.

Perfect. Strange, yes.. but it provided all the conditions for a concrete and unambiguous test. Where would we find such a test subject?

Though Rosemary seemed sincere and trustworthy, we always have to be on guard against cheating. If she provided us with a test subject, that person could simply "let go" at the right moment. The test subject had to be someone the JREF trusted. It had to be someone who wasn't easily embarrassed, who had an interest in keeping the challenge money safe (unless an actual effect was detected), and someone willing to have their crotch filmed for 15 minutes. It had to be.. me.



The protocol was very simple. Rosemary and I would be in a room. After a couple of minutes of prep time, she would begin to pray. With emptied bladder, I would stand in the same spot (Linda insisted it be done on a tiled portion of the floor) for 15 minutes with cameras watching for any sign of wetness. A pre-test was done to ensure that jeans would show even a small amount of liquid. Rosemary would be allowed to touch my hands if she desired (contact diuretics I wondered..) but during the test, she chose not to.

Rosemary had reported some success with this ability in the past, and actually had a reporter state that, while he didn't completely lose control, he felt "weird." While paying attention for signs of "weirdness," I real-

ized that “paying attention” could actually lead to an effect, much in the same way that approaching a rest room can increase urgency (which is very apparent if your trip is somehow interrupted.) I focussed my attention elsewhere as the seconds ticked by.

After 15 minutes, one thing was apparent... standing in the same spot for that long is hard on my back. Other than that, there was no effect. Rosemary had failed the challenge. I was both relieved and disappointed.

There are a number of important things to be said about this challenge.

First off, Rosemary was a delight to work with. We often deal with people who are vague, evasive, and sometimes nasty, but Rosemary was forthright, polite, and honest. I have no doubt that she believes she has paranormal abilities, and that her failure at the challenge surprised her. She readily admitted that she failed, and offered no excuses. Though I believe she is mistaken about her abilities, I hold her in high regard and wish her the best.

Second, though a claim of “paranormal urine” may seem silly and a waste of time, why should it? After all, don't all the things we test such as ESP and dowsing seem silly at some level? If she really had this ability, it would be no less significant than if she could read minds or find water underground.

Finally, why was Rosemary tested when so many other claimants haven't been?

Simply because Rosemary followed the rules. She did everything we asked in a timely and professional manner, and if others followed her example, they'd be tested too.

Video of this challenge is available at: <http://tinyurl.com/4c6yhs>. Apologies for not having my shirt tucked in... that was the most embarrassing part of the whole thing.

With that in mind, I'll accept that not all Brights are necessarily smart...

The Brights' three major aims are to promote public understanding of the naturalistic world view, gain public recognition that those who hold such a world view can bring properly-motivated actions to bear on matters of civic importance, and that they can educate society toward accepting the full and equitable participation of all like-minded people. Their own self definition means that Brights are not religious, since religion does not offer evidence.



I never had the problem of extricating myself from a belief in a deity. Many others have had to do sometimes-painful 180-degree turns from previously-held positions. A prominent example of this situation is arch-sceptic Michael Shermer, 54, who 25 years ago was involved in acupuncture, chiropractic, rolfing, pyramid power, and Fundamentalist Christianity, until his personal epiphany took place, and he abandoned all that in favor of rationality. For this reason, Michael and I have come to our Bright position quite differently, and from different directions; while he can look back on a dark period of his life from which he escaped, I must say that from the earliest age I can remember, I never believed a bit of the claptrap I was quite well exposed to. For examples, my father accepted the Bates method of eye-cure quackery and other improve-yourself schemes, and my mother was educated in a Catholic girls' school; both were affected by the popular nonsense that I didn't even *have* to resist, because I spotted it for what it was: something to shoot down, someday.

Perhaps I should re-state the JREF's stance on religion. Though I am a firm atheist, in that I state that I have not found any convincing evidence of a deity, the JREF treats religious claims just as any other supernatural claims, and that includes angels, demons, prayers, deities, heaven-and-hell, and miracles, as claims that must be proven. And, our million-dollar offer applies to any and all religious matters, of course. As an atheist, I don't claim – as so many do – that there *is* no God, simply because I cannot prove that negative statement, any more than I can prove that there is *not* a unicorn in Germany. I allow others to make statements about supernatural matters, and then ask them to prove them – for a substantial prize. The JREF

ignores religion because it – generally – doesn't make disprovable statements. It's usually, "That's what I believe, prove me wrong," which – see above – is something we cannot do. But we don't make any statements, believers do, so we challenge them to prove it.

I often get asked difficult questions, such as, "How do I argue against the existence of God?" Without knowing a lot about the inquirer, I can't answer that with anything meaningful. Matters of education, experience, skills, and training, are important to know about before such an inquiry can be responded to appropriately. Most persons who ask such a question are not accustomed to debating or arguing a situation, and are off to a weak start already. Reading, and attending discussions of these matters, can greatly improve one's chances of making an impression on another person, but don't count on it...

Losing a religion or any pseudoscientific belief-system, can be a slow and difficult process, but it can also become a satisfying intellectual awakening, as superstition, mysticism and mythology are put aside. A naturalistic point of view, the overall perspective from which you see and interpret the world, covers a lot of territory. Many years ago, I stood in the Cathedral of Notre Dame – only slightly fearful of a bolt of divine lightning – and noted that one small section of a stained-glass window had been broken out. That entire window told the picture-story of some saint or other, in brilliant, saturated, dramatic colors, but I recall thinking that those hues and artfully-worked shapes expressed the beliefs of an artist, beliefs taught to him in school and by his culture. What caught my attention was the shaft of unaltered sunlight that now shot across the vestry from the broken section and registered in the dust-laden atmosphere of Notre Dame. In that beam of pure light was every color of the spectrum, and a few above- and below-vision frequencies, as well. Any pictorial story could have been constructed from those photons, not just the one the artist chose to tell...

Yes, I'm a Bright. We're now active in 149 nations. So stand back...!
More information on the "Brights" at <http://the-brights-net>

- James Randi

I walk through the living room of the King Ranch Suite at the Menger Hotel, very aware of each creak of the floor as my feet press into it. It's a bit like walking in sand, as though the wood beneath the carpet is desperate to come up and fill the spaces between my toes. I wonder briefly if, by the end of the night, I will wind up falling like Alice through the floor and onto the couch of the room below. I pick up a complimentary bottle of water and imagine it says "Drink Me."

Power cords crisscross the floor through the legs of the antique chairs, hooking up all the cameras, voice recorders, EMF detectors, and thermometers that the bellhop dragged up to the room. He very kindly didn't ask if I planned to record a pornographic movie, though the question lingered somewhere in his eyes. Jeff Wagg, SAPS Associate, is in the bedroom placing three thermometers for a base reading. He drops a voice recorder onto the bedside table and whispers into it, "Is anyone there?" as though it's a telephone.

Ghost hunters might have you believe that it is.

It's hard to carry all the equipment at once, so I bounce back and forth between the technology that's supposed to enable me to find the soul of Richard King, who died in the bed of this hotel room and is said to still haunt the place. In an interview before arriving here, I said that according to the hotel representatives, the bed was the same one that King died in. His corpse was left there for days. At the time, I joked that I hoped they had changed the mattress. One test of the mattress showed me they had – but that they'd replaced it with the stiffest one on the entire planet. When I laid down to try and summon up King (with hopes, not with Ouija boards), my only thought was how tacky the folded peach silk of the canopy was. There was no chill, and no fear. But I did try.

I climb up on one of the antique wooden chairs to get a reading on the EMF detector of the living room ceiling, and feel a crunch that lightly tosses me to the floor. Broken antique furniture is apparently a necessity on the road to the undead. I spend several minutes reattaching the chair's arm, watching the EMF rise and fall depending on where I set it.

When I'm done, I wander over to a giant painting on the wall behind the couch. The painting is done in what I think is oils, and shows a group of cows munching their way down a country path. I have high hopes for this painting. I saw *1408*, and in the movie, the paintings

on the wall of John Cusack's room were evil and ghostly and could change from a peaceful scene to one of terror at any moment. I wait for the cows to turn into monster cows, for the EMF's needle to swing upward. It doesn't happen.

I head into the bedroom, where Jeff is hooking up a series of three security cameras with Nightshot pointed at the bed. I will have the pleasure of sleeping in the haunted bed, while Jeff will be on the couch, overseen by the monster cows. I get an EMF spike, a big one.

"Jeff, we're getting something!" I cry. I don't know why I'm excited, since I know that the reading probably means that someone in the next room is using a television. But Jeff and I crouch over the equipment, moving back and forth in a game of Hot and Cold, searching for the source.

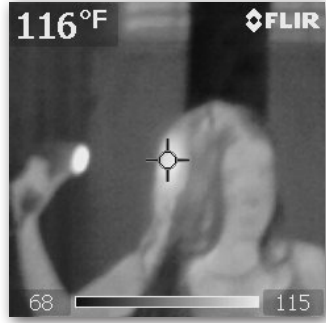
The readings pull us to the bedside table, where the voice recorder is diligently documenting exactly how silly I sound. But the reading isn't coming from there. I stick the EMF detector next to the red, digital alarm clock, which is emitting the highest reading I have ever seen. Cancer crosses my mind before ghosts do, and yet I think back again to *1408*, where Cusack was terrorized by the alarm clock, which, instead of telling time, counted down one hour (at the end of which he would supposedly be released from the terror of the room).

I wait for the alarm clock to spout out a seemingly innocent song that has a vein of heavy creepitude, like maybe "Someone to Watch Over Me," but the alarm, infuriatingly, continues to say the time, which is 3:15 am.

"Let's play with the Flir," Jeff says.

The Flir is really our big SAPS investment on this investigation. Flir is an extremely expensive thermal camera. I do not recommend getting one just to find out the temperature of various parts of your body (though I sure used it for that. And no, I will not be sharing what those temperatures are...). Ghost hunters originally started using thermal cameras to look for cold spots, which are associated with ghostly activity. The fact that, so far, every single 'ghost' shown on a paranormal television show reads hot should say something. And that something would be, "You are looking at a human being, sillyass."

We ran through a couple of tests to figure out if a thermal camera would be able to read a cold air spot at all. Unfortunately, we didn't have any giant containers of cold air, so we tried hot instead. I hooked up the hotel blow dryer and prepared to look silly.



As you can tell, even though the temperature of the room itself was around seventy degrees (as recorded by our ambient air thermometers' base readings)

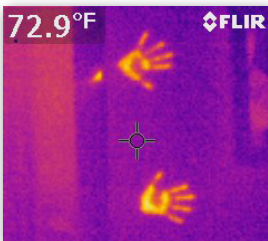
and the air coming out of the blow dryer is one hundred and sixteen degrees, the air itself does not change color to indicate that – only the point of contact with the hair. When doing this test, it suddenly struck me how obvious it was. Of course a Flir does not generally read temperature differences in the air. If it did, you'd be unable to see anything else. For example, if it's a hot Texas day outside, then the Flir would read it as off-average. And if it was measuring the air, then the entire outside world would read orange. No, a Flir reads surface temperatures, just as the IR thermometers that I've discussed in earlier articles.

To double-check this concept, we took the Flir over to the air conditioning vent, and turned the air conditioner on high. Waving our hands, we were able to tell that the temperature of the air coming out of the vent was significantly different from the ambient air. We looked through the camera and discovered that, though the vent itself and the area of the ceiling around it read cold, the air itself was undetectable.

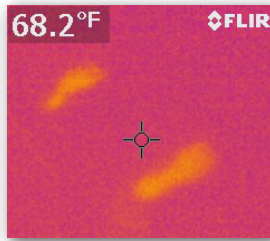
Tests have been done online to show Flir's effectiveness at detecting cold spots, so we were kind of stumped. Jeff and I reviewed the video and discovered that the individuals promoting the camera's use in this way were using compressed gas (difluoroethane) to simulate the cold spots. I have so far been unable to find an exact temperature for expelled compressed air (one person who tried to measure it was using a thermometer that only read down to -20 degrees Celsius, and it hit bottom), but I can say that it is cold enough to cause an immediate ice cone to form if you tilt the can while pushing the button. And if you tilt the can and stick your hand in the way, it causes immediate frostbite (don't try this at home. I have. It really does, it really hurts, and it's really not worth it to find out.). Meaning: This is some seriously cold air. This is not a little ghostly cold spot that shifts

the temperature from eighty degrees to sixty degrees. Pretty much the only way you can measure a ghost's cold spot with a Flir thermal camera is if the ghost you're hunting happens to be the Abominable Snowman.

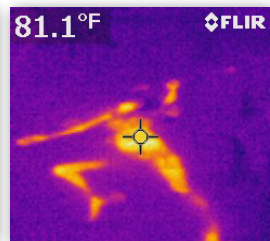
If you don't mind 'hot' ghosts, though, which some ghost hunting groups claim are 'demonic spirits' (carrying with them the fires of hell, and therefore the warmth exactly that of human beings on earth... which actually opens up a whole new round of philosophical inquiry...) then you can easily create them with the handy Flir camera.



Ghostly handprints



Ghostly footprints



Ghostly body outline

In previous articles, I have snickered a little at the equipment ghost hunters use in their endless search for the hereafter, but at this point I truly am intrigued. So far, EMF Detectors are ineffective, IR thermometers are ineffective, voice recorders are a lot of fun, but easily fooled, and apparently the Flir also struggles with this application. Cameras and camcorders remain the best way of searching, if that's what you're into.

SAPS has begun devising new methods of ghost hunting. Some of our ideas are not as technologically exciting as a series of battery-powered toys with fun number readouts that you can shout while trekking through the confines of a haunted mansion. More on that another time. But just to give you an exciting sneak peek of SAPS newest plans...

It involves ping pong balls.

- Alison Smith, SAPS Founder. <http://www.skepticalanalysis.com>
- Skeptical Analysis of the Paranormal Society



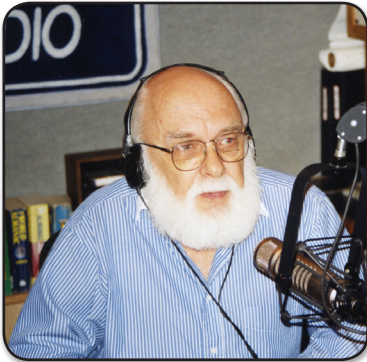
The Escape-Artist showing the strait-jacket from which he'd just extricated his poor body. This was a "Posey" jacket, my very favorite kind – the same kind I still use in my own home.

Randi and escapist Dean Gunnarson are pondering the merits of an exact-replica of the famous Houdini Milk-Can Escape. Dean now owns - and regularly uses this apparatus – in his act.



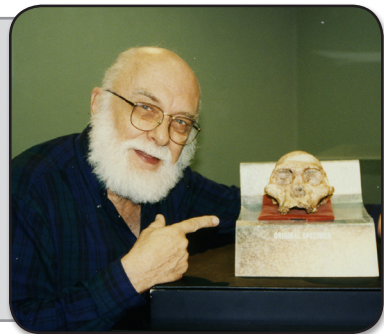
Outside the huge Thalia Theatre in Wuppertal-Elberfeld, Germany, where I played with the "Duel im Atlantik" – "The Enemy Below" film. I was featured as "Der Entfesselungskünstler."

I was recently a guest on the German show “Welt Der Wunder” – World of Wonder – showing how all Geller’s tricks are done. This was also shown in other European countries.



Briefly, years ago, we did a weekly radio show in Florida, but I quickly terminated it after the station opted to become super-woo-woo and began featuring quacks and “psychics.”

In South Africa, your amateur scientist poses with one of the famous “Lucy” skulls and tries to look academic. She was the oldest girl I ever met, and very quiet and polite...



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