

Never a Dull Moment

Barry Karr

It is amazing really when you think about it: what the ramifications can be, at least for me, from an action that basically originated as an afterthought. You see, my sister was a senior at the State University of New York at Buffalo, and she had taken a part-time job with CSICOP, which her roommate had gotten for her. It seemed that they were still a bit short-staffed and needed some help with a large press mailing. After going through a couple of her friends she eventually thought of me, a sophomore at the university. She called me up and asked if I would like to work for a few hours a week between classes. I went into the office and did what they told me, which was, I believe, stuffing about 2,500 magazines into envelopes and helping to prepare them for mailing to members of the press around the country. Now, how long it took to complete the task is uncer-



Barry Karr

Barry Karr is executive director of the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal (CSICOP) and the Center for Inquiry (CFI) in Amherst, New York. He is coeditor of the SKEPTICAL INQUIRER anthologies The UFO Invasion and The Outer Edge.

tain. I like to think I must have made good time because by my third day there, and after a couple of other assignments, I was called into Paul Kurtz's office for a job interview. I got the

position by the way and have been involved with CSICOP ever since. Lucky for me my sister didn't have more friends. Although at this point CSICOP as an organization was in its fifth year, and third office location, I still think of these as the very early days of the organization. There is a saying around the office these days: "Never a dull moment"—which is true. We used that expression back then too, but it meant a totally different thing. Whereas today it seems that there is always a new project that needs doing—some new television show or movie on the paranormal, or shameless promotion of some quack therapy that needs looking into—back then it meant that "Today it is going to rain

and we need to get the SKEPTICAL INQUIRER out the door before the leak in the ceiling destroys a thousand issues." Our offices were in a deteriorating office/apartment building in a deteriorating neighborhood in the city of Buffalo. Lunch generally meant going next door to the overpriced corner grocery store and trying to buy something with an expiration date roughly in the same year. We had basically no computer

system; new subscriptions, renewals, and other in-house records were kept track of on index cards sorted by alphabetical order. The subscription data itself was handled by an out-of-house fulfillment agency that did the printing of the magazine and maintained our database. I can remember having to borrow a car to periodically head on down to the printer and load up with magazines and then take them over to the central post office. I can also clearly remember getting lost from time to time trying to find these places and in one exceptionally brilliant feat ending up on the bridge going into Canada.

There was, however, a definite feeling of camaraderie among the staff. We celebrated every birthday and major event in each other's lives. We held weekly and sometimes daily cookouts on the back patio, weather permitting. We even had a regular bowling night. It was certainly an interesting place to work while in college—a perpetual educational experience where I learned to think about things in a new way and not simply accept what I had been told. For example, while growing up I had been a notorious bad-movie junkie (truth be told, I still am), and was certainly a fan of all things paranormal. My favorite show was *The Night Stalker*, and I can vividly remember running home from school to watch the vampire-themed soap opera *Dark Shadows*. I was a creature of my television generation. Never had I seen or read anything to suggest that some of these things were not somehow based in reality. Of course I wasn't naive enough to believe in vampires, but I must admit to having written a glowing, wide-eyed book review on *Chariots of the Gods?*

By the time my senior year at the university rolled around I found myself working more and more hours at CSICOP each week and my status at the university trimmed to that of a part-time student. My plan had always been to go on to law school upon graduation, but a year with a first-year law student as a roommate soon cured me of that. When graduation rolled around I was very pleased to have Paul Kurtz offer me a full-time position as assistant public relations director. Although I thought I'd do this for a year and eventually go back to school I haven't quite made it back yet. I really don't regret it.

Over the years it has been my pleasure to take part in many adventures and investigations that not many of my friends, family, or neighbors have had the opportunity to experience. Probably my second-greatest thrill was the opportunity to travel to China in 1988 as part of a CSICOP team conducting investigations into *qigong* masters, amazing psychic children, and remote healers, along with other facets of traditional Chinese medicine. The results of these investigations have been well documented within the pages of the *SKEPTICAL INQUIRER*. However, it is the personal moments that don't get discussed. I remember eating a spectacular dinner one evening with our hosts. To be honest I had no idea what some of what I was eating was. Sitting across from me and staring intently was James Randi. As I brought the chopsticks up to my mouth with a morsel of something, Randi burst out laughing at me.

I never knew what it was I ate. It was good, but I never wanted to know.

Some of the other moments of the trip will live forever in my memory. I won't forget the way members of the CSICOP team played with and enjoyed entertaining the children. While a test was being conducted, everything was very serious, but the next moment at the conclusion of a test there would be Randi performing magic tricks. I remember how James Alcock, who is quite tall, would draw a crowd wherever he went, or Paul Kurtz telling jokes and laughing with them until he had tears in his eyes. He still keeps photographs of some of these children in his office today.

Also, what hasn't been mentioned is the absolute joy it was to meet with skeptics within China who requested the help of CSICOP to investigate these claims and bring in skepticism. Because of this trip an organization was established as part of the Chinese Association for Popularization of Science to promote skepticism within the country. Since then we have had a delegation from China attend several of our conferences over the years, and we were also able to send a second CSICOP delegation a few years later. This relationship continues. It illustrates the powerful impact that CSICOP has been having worldwide in stimulating skeptical inquiry and crystallizing a scientific response to the great barrage of paranormal claims.

Such people as Phil Klass, Ray Hyman, James Randi, Joe Nickell, Richard Wiseman, Massimo Polidoro, and others wonderfully fill the role of paranormal investigator/researcher. Although there is a need for more people to do investigations, they must be done well. There have been several instances where I have been involved with investigations. Perhaps the most well known is the demon-haunting case of the Smurls in West Pittston, Pennsylvania. The case was made into a book, and later a television movie. And again, our investigation has been written up in the *SKEPTICAL INQUIRER*. Fellow investigator (and former CSICOP staff member) Elizabeth Gehrman and I spent several days in West Pittston interviewing neighbors, visiting the Mining Office, the Street Commissioner, and the former owner of the house, and we briefly met with the Smurls, who would not let us in the house. However, I think my fondest memory of the trip to West Pittston was the hotel that Elizabeth and I booked. We arrived in town late after a long drive from Buffalo. We did not have a reservation confirmed at a hotel and decided to just pick the first one we saw. Little did we realize that the hotel we chose was right across the street from a porno drive-in movie theater. We were naturally suspicious when the man at the reception desk asked if we wanted the room for the night or if we wanted to pay by the hour! Being really tired we took a room with two double beds for the night. CSICOP is, after all, a nonprofit organization and we always have an eye on the bottom line. Sometime after we'd been in the room for a while Elizabeth began to complain

that there was something crawling all over her legs in the bed. I went over to her side of the room and looked to find the bed and the room covered with bedbugs.

We went to the manager to complain. He was not too nice at that point but offered us another room. His mood turned even uglier when, for some reason or another, Elizabeth would not accept this offer. Here my recollection gets a little fuzzy and I am not sure whether we had paid in cash and had demanded our money back, or told him we would stop payment on the credit card. Either way he figured we had gotten our hour's worth and threatened to call the cops on us. I do remember leaving the parking lot quickly with Elizabeth screaming at the top of her lungs. I also remember thinking that a demon-haunted house would most likely be a more pleasant experience.

On another occasion members of CSICOP and the Western New York Skeptics were called upon to look into a haunted house in the Western New York area. Several skeptics went to the house and recorded interviews with the family that lived there. Most of the events centered upon the mother of the house. She would complain, for example, that while she was lying in bed unseen spirits would pull the covers over her legs. We asked her if we could observe this and she agreed to try the demonstration. As she was lying in bed she repeatedly said that the blankets were moving and asked if we could see them. Nobody else in the room could see anything happening. (We sent our report on the case, along with all of our audiotapes, to psychologist and noted haunted-house investigator Robert Baker for his analysis. Baker ended up writing about the case briefly in his book *Missing Pieces* where he attributed the woman's condition to a neurological disorder called "restless legs.") Later, in the living room of the house, the woman claimed that every once in a while when she sat in a certain chair a spirit would flash across the room. A moment later she exclaimed that one had just done so. I too had noticed the flash and immediately suspected what was going on. I went to the window and looked out. The house was situated so that the front window looked out over an intersection and street. When a car would make a turn down the street from the intersection, the headlights would momentarily flash into the window between a gap in the curtains. She did seem to accept this when I was able to predict the next sighting.

Another event that was quite newsworthy a few years ago was the New Age "harmonic convergence," basically an alleged mystical coming together of astrology and the Mayan calendar, when 144,000 people were needed to gather in "power points" around the world to mediate, welcome alien spaceships, and heal the earth. One of these "power points" was to be Terrapin Point overlooking Niagara Falls. At dawn of the appointed day several of us were positioned around the point to see what we would see. The day's activities consisted of alternating sessions of meditation, chanting, and prayer. Needless to say, no aliens showed up and if a Harmonic Converged I must have missed

it. At one point a number of the almost 500 to 750 people became somewhat excited when a rainbow appeared over the falls. The excitement level seemed to dissipate somewhat when the skeptics started passing the word that rainbows are virtually an everyday occurrence at the falls. As I wrote in the *Western New York Skeptics Newsletter*, "When the chanting was finished and all the little crystals had been thrown over the falls, many people felt spiritually uplifted, enlightened, and full of a sense of accomplishment. But, to quote from *Newsweek* magazine, 'Making yourself feel good about the world is not the same thing as improving the world. Want to think a good thought? Think about 144,000 people volunteering an hour a week to work in shelters for the homeless. That would be something to hum about.'"

One of the investigations that skeptics around the world should be most proud of is the several-year-long investigation, led by James Randi, into the faith healers. During that time I had traveled around the Western New York area and into southern Ontario to attend the services of such faith healers as W. V. Grant, Peter Popoff, the Happy Hunters, and Willard Fuller. When James Randi went on *The Tonight Show* and blew the lid off the Peter Popoff ministry, I know that skeptics everywhere felt a tremendous sense of accomplishment. When other national media news shows did much the same to W. V. Grant, we again felt rewarded for the many hours that a number of people put into the effort. I had two experiences that will forever leave a bad taste in my mouth. The first one occurred at a healing service by Peter Popoff held in Toronto, Canada. Several members of the Western New York Skeptics and the Ontario Skeptics met in advance and planned to distribute leaflets describing our objections to Popoff and explaining what it was he was doing and how he had been exposed. Other members, myself included, would fake ailments and attempt to be healed. Popoff claimed to be directed by God as to whom to heal. Thus, our point was that, if one of us got called for healing, either God made a mistake or Popoff did not have the direct line to heaven that he claimed.

I walked into the arena with a fake limp, using a cane. Right away some of Popoff's people came up to me and asked me for the healing card I had filled out previously. I wrote that I had a ruptured disk in my back that caused severe pain in my leg when I walked. As the service started Popoff's people told everyone in the audience to crumple up the flyers they had received from the people outside because those people were unbelievers and worked for Satan. Things were not starting off well. Later on in the service, however, Popoff came down the row I was in and told me to stand up. I did. He then put his hand on my forehead and told me that God was going to heal me and took my cane and threw it up on the stage. He said that God was going to let me walk (which I could do anyway). He then told me to run

around a bit, which I did. Either God or Popoff couldn't tell I was a fake.

If we had accomplished what we set out to do, then why did I feel so bad? Because sitting next to me was a father and mother with an obviously severely handicapped child in a baby stroller. It was clear that these people had come to the service hoping for a miracle for their child. Of course Popoff avoided them. But the way they looked at me will stay with me forever. The look said, "Why you? Why should you be healed and not my baby?" It was so clear that if anyone ever wanted to prove they could perform miracles and heal the sick then this child would be absolute proof. But their look showed they hated me and not Popoff. I pulled one of our flyers out of my pocket and handed it to them asking them to really read it over. I tried to explain to them that I wasn't sick to begin with and that no miracle had taken place. I think that only made it worse, as if some miracle had been wasted on someone who didn't even deserve it. I really dislike Peter Popoff.

On another occasion the faith-healing husband and wife team, the Happy Hunters, came to Rochester, New York, for a "Healing Explosion." "Thousands will be healed!" promised the slick advertising supplement announcing the event. The first person on the podium that night was a member of the Rochester city council, who gave the opening address and read a letter of welcome from Rochester's mayor. Traveling faith healers are not unlike a touring rock and roll band, or the road show of a Broadway play in that they have a set program (or act) that they follow day in and day out in city after city. The Hunters were two of the more innovative. Not only did they themselves practice the art of laying on of hands, but they also ran a service that provided training for individuals who wished to become members of the healing teams. The Hunters did not charge for the training, but they would charge for the *training materials*.

The most striking aspect of the Hunter "healings" was the team's almost total reliance upon the lengthening of arms and legs to effect a cure. Although this trick was thoroughly exposed by James Randi in his book *The Faith Healers*, a conservative estimate on my part was that 70 percent of all treatments offered by the healing teams were of this variety.

After the service I attempted to interview a number of people who were healed that evening. I had asked if I could follow up with them again in a few weeks and a number of them agreed. After a couple of weeks I began calling back the people I had spoken to at the service. One woman said that she felt better and that sometimes healings took time. When I asked her why God would only heal a little bit at a time she said, "God works in strange ways. If he sees fit he will do it." She then said two things that broke my heart: "Maybe I'm not entitled to it" and "Maybe I'm not trying hard enough to get out" (of the wheelchair). In these statements lie the reason for much of my resentment toward faith healers. If something that they promise does not work, it is not the fault of the healer. Mrs. Hunter said,

"If you believe God is God, it is so easy to receive a healing."

The lady in the wheelchair was very devout in her faith, but she was not healed. Instead of calling into question the whole business of faith healing, or the Hunters' ability to either teach it or perform it, she blamed herself. Why weren't the Hunters able to heal her? Why wasn't she entitled to a healing?

I spoke to the Hunters two days before the Rochester event when they appeared on the local television program *AM Buffalo*. After the show I asked the Hunters about the people who are devout in their faith, yet who are not cured of their illnesses. I asked them what this might do to someone's faith, self-esteem, and belief. Charles Hunter looked at me and said simply, "I don't know." I wondered if he had ever thought about it before.

My take on the history of CSICOP probably wouldn't be complete without at least some mention of "psychic" Uri Geller. For a period of several years in the 1990s it seemed that a great deal of my time was spent dealing with lawsuits filed (Geller was suing CSICOP and James Randi for statements made by Randi which called into question Geller's alleged paranormal abilities), or lawsuits threatened, or numerous scare-tactic letters arriving from various lawyers from around the world or some other form of puff and bluster which to me seemed like a desperate attempt to recapture faded glory, or at least to make himself feel important again. I always found this somewhat ironic because of my decision years earlier to avoid law as a career. I remember that the one time I met Geller was at our lawyer's office in Washington, D.C., where Paul Kurtz had been called for a deposition. We met Geller in the hallway where he was very personable and attempted to be charming. He stuck out his hand and said, "I'm Uri Geller and it is a pleasure to meet you." I refused to shake his hand and basically tried to ignore him. He became agitated and stated something *to the effect that the difference between us was that he could still be a nice guy and did not take any of this personally*. I responded that the difference between us was that he was suing us and we weren't suing him, which to me was personal. Eventually CSICOP won all of the lawsuits brought against us and managed to recover some of our legal costs as sanctions imposed upon Geller by the court. I often find myself wondering what he tells his children about his "powers."

When you consider the body of knowledge that is the SKEPTICAL INQUIRER magazine and the Fellows and consultants who make up the committee, it is certainly impressive. Recently we conducted a rough tally of the number of events such as conferences, workshops, or seminars we had sponsored over the years and it was well into the hundreds. As public relations director for CSICOP for many years, and now executive director, I know that we would get between six hundred and eight hundred media calls each year from around the world. We try our best to supply journalists with the best experts on the subjects they are considering, or the best reference articles from the SKEPTICAL INQUIRER or

another source. But it is also true that we receive probably several times as many calls and requests from members of the general public for information on a vast array of topics. From schoolchildren writing a paper on UFOs to people with a sincere belief that their houses are haunted, we run the gamut of topics and try to help whenever we can.

I say this often and I believe it totally—I am amazed at the amount of information and effort that flows in and out of our little building each day. I have file cabinets and boxes filled with the tens of thousands of requests we receive for help and information. It is probably one of the most unappreciated roles that CSICOP plays in the world.

Perhaps I shouldn't actually say "little building" anymore. Because of the vision and hard work of many people we now have a much nicer headquarters (the Center for Inquiry) than in those early days and it seems we are doing more than ever before. It is still appalling to see how much more we have to do. Quite a bit of my time these days seems to be taken up by office mechanics, such things as publishing contracts, bids on new telecom systems, computer upgrades, legal issues, and the like. It is a sign, of course, of a maturing and permanent organization. It is very satisfying to realize that CSICOP will continue for a long time. Several years ago, I don't think I could have made that claim. We were always flying by the seat of our pants and really did survive on a day-to-day basis. On the other hand, I kind of long for the times when I personally could take time to ponder the latest UFO claim from Russia, or go out on a ghost hunt. Although I did get to take part in my first firewalk recently, these opportunities seem too few and far between.

As I travel around from city to city and country to country I am always impressed how belief in superstition, the paranormal, and fringe-science claims; untested alternative medical treatments; and antiscience and pseudoscience are part of a global phenomenon. The particular belief or the pseudoscience may be different in each country but the need for a skeptical response is vital. In 1980 in the back of the *SKEPTICAL INQUIRER* we listed a grand total of nine groups of skeptics from around the world with which we cooperated. Today we list well over a hundred with several others currently in various stages of formation. CSICOP constantly has someone on the road visiting groups, attending international events, sending out reader surveys, working the phones, and writing letters and e-mails. Over the years I have been to many places across the United States, as well as visiting probably twenty other countries. It is generally fun, and always stimulating. It is also true that on many occasions the trip can be summarized as get on the plane, go to hotel, attend three days of lectures and workshops, go to the airport and get on the plane. In my experience the hotel I stayed at in Madrid, Spain, looks an awful lot like the one I stayed at in Tucson, Arizona. This has been hard work. But it is work that is important and necessary. We act as the international hub for a growing network of men and women who believe in science and the use of reason and critical thinking skills in examining claims.

Think of the vast worldwide media companies whose only motivation is profit and market share. They have virtually no interest in telling things like they are, or presenting paranormal and fringe science from a skeptical perspective. The paranormal is entertainment and the paranormal sells. It does seem odd to think that as a twenty-five-year-old organization we've now got more work to do than at any other time in our history. Truly, and somewhat sadly, there never really is a dull moment.

Many of us are familiar with the names of the heroes of CSICOP. People like Paul Kurtz, Ray Hyman, Martin Gardner, Ken Frazier, Carl Sagan, Isaac Asimov, Stephen Jay Gould, Philip Klass, James Randi, Richard Dawkins, Joe Nickell, and others. I think there is a group of people who are unsung and deserve a world of thanks for the work they have done for the organization. These people include Mary Rose Hays, the first business manager of CSICOP who really kept it going during those lean, dark days. Doris Doyle, managing editor of the *SKEPTICAL INQUIRER* for so many years. The day for Doris must have had forty-eight hours in it. She seemed to work full-time for CSICOP even though her real job was at Prometheus Books. Doris was an absolutely delightful and totally wonderful person. One of the hardest-working people I ever saw was Alfreda Pidgeon. She would do whatever you asked of her and do it perfectly. She retired from our staff at the age of eighty-three. I used to tell her that I wished I could clone her and have several of her working for us at the same time. Vance Vigrass has been with CSICOP since almost the very beginning. He has literally kept some of our offices and machines working by duct tape and force of will alone. Paul Paulin is also a truly remarkable staff person as well. My hope is that we will be able to keep him on staff until he is eighty-three.

I also think Paul Kurtz is far too much an underappreciated and unsung hero as well. He is the founder of CSICOP and you know him by his writings, his speeches, and his media appearances. But so much of what he does is behind the scenes. You really cannot appreciate him until you see how much effort and dedication he puts into this organization. He works harder than anyone his age, half his age, a quarter of his age, etc. I can't keep up with him. I wish we could clone him as well. (I think we'll keep a bit of Paul Kurtz DNA locked up in the CSICOP archives just in case.)

Earlier in this article I mentioned that going along to China with the CSICOP team was probably the second-biggest thrill I have ever received from working at CSICOP. The biggest, by far and without question, is that I met my wife, Chris, when she was a graphic designer doing much of the production work on the *SKEPTICAL INQUIRER*. Chris and I were married on 9/9/99 (so I could remember the date) and we now have a beautiful baby daughter and another now on the way. I owe CSICOP quite a lot, but I do try to pay it back a little bit every day. □