

Fakers and Innocents

The One Million Dollar Challenge and Those Who Try for It

James Randi describes some of the difficult, innocent, and impossible people who apply to be tested for his foundation's \$1 million challenge for evidence of paranormal powers.

JAMES RANDI

I am going to describe difficult, impossible, and unknowing contestants who've applied for the James Randi Educational Foundation's million-dollar prize. I can say this from the very beginning: give me a faker, give me someone who appears before me and is lying, who is attempting to fool me, to deceive me, or to deceive anyone else, the media, or other scientists. Please don't give me the innocent who really believe they have the powers. They're the difficult ones to handle; a true believer is a terrible enemy, but the fakers I can handle. Those people I can come out against, I can confront them, I can show what they are doing, and get rid of 'em.

Now, of the people who apply for the million-dollar

challenge of the James Randi Educational Foundation—and I'm sure you all go to my Web site regularly, right? It's www.randi.org. All right. You will find, reading over the archives on that Web site, that about 80 percent or more of the people who apply are dowzers, or diviners. That is, people who, with a forked stick or with a pendulum or with some sort of wire stretched out in front of them, believe that they can find water, gold, oil, lost jewelry, children, anything.

One man even told us that he had a particular, specific ability. This dowser lived in Kentucky, and said that he had the ability to find lost hunting dogs; that was the only thing he could find. He was very sensitive to that, and if you were able to give him a little hair from the hunting dog, he would put it on the end of his dowsing stick and it would lead him directly to the dog.

Sometimes there was an error. Sometimes it would lead him to another hunting dog, which was very similar because the DNA would be very similar, you see? He actually told me that he was tuning in on the DNA, and then he said, "Oh, there's one other thing that I can find, too." We said, "What is that?" He said, "I can find bullets, because I tune in on the DNA of bullets."

Now, I didn't know that bullets reproduce that way. Perhaps you take two .38-caliber bullets, leave them alone for a while, and they produce .22-caliber bullets? I don't know. These people are so exceedingly naïve. These are the hard people to handle. Someone who has a trick, I can get 'em right away.

Now, handling the subject of difficult cases that we have to investigate, I hate to tell you this, but the application form for the James Randi Educational Foundation prize has twelve, I think now thirteen, rules. Very simple. They're not difficult to understand. The most important one of the rules is that you have to say what you can do, under what circumstances, with what accuracy. How could anything be simpler?

Well, a good 80 percent of the people who apply can't make that statement. Not only that, they're told on the application form that they must write two paragraphs—no more—describing what their ability is.

People can write very long paragraphs. Some of those paragraphs run three pages. We had one just recently from a gentleman who had some strange claim—I don't remember—

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did 18 pages, filled on both sides, in handwriting. I think his ancestry must have been Turkish or something, he was still using, I think, the Turkish alphabet. It was almost impossible to understand what he was writing about. We had to get him down to two paragraphs, and that's not easy.

Completing the form is the most difficult thing that these people have to do. After that, it's pretty easy. That doesn't seem logical. You would think at this very moment there should be people knocking on the door trying to get my attention so they could try for the million-dollar prize. I don't hear anybody knocking, do you? No.

Now, another thing that is very, very difficult to investigate is medical claims. Our colleagues in India, through B. Premanand there, a most estimable gentleman, good friend of mine, the people in India have a little more freedom to investigate these things. There is a wonderful documentary made by the BBC some years ago in which they followed Mr. Premanand around and they had to demonstrate that the so-called "god men" of India could not heal as they claimed they

could heal. They actually had a snake bite a dog. Now, that's not acceptable in our society, particularly not in England, where animals are more important than human beings, believe me. They had the snake bite the dog, and then the guru, the "god man," tried to save the dog. Not to your great surprise, I will tell you that the dog died.

Now, the guru, the "god man," was most amazed at this. "Oh, it always worked before," he said. Well, we offered to do

another test with him. He didn't want to do that, and we haven't seen him since. See, you can get away with that sort of thing in some countries, but certainly not in England, not in the United States, and—I suspect—certainly not in Italy.

Now, every now and then the difficult cases are ridden, like a horse, by some scientist, some academic who has adopted this as his *cause célèbre*, something that he's going to promote, he just *knows* the claim must be true.

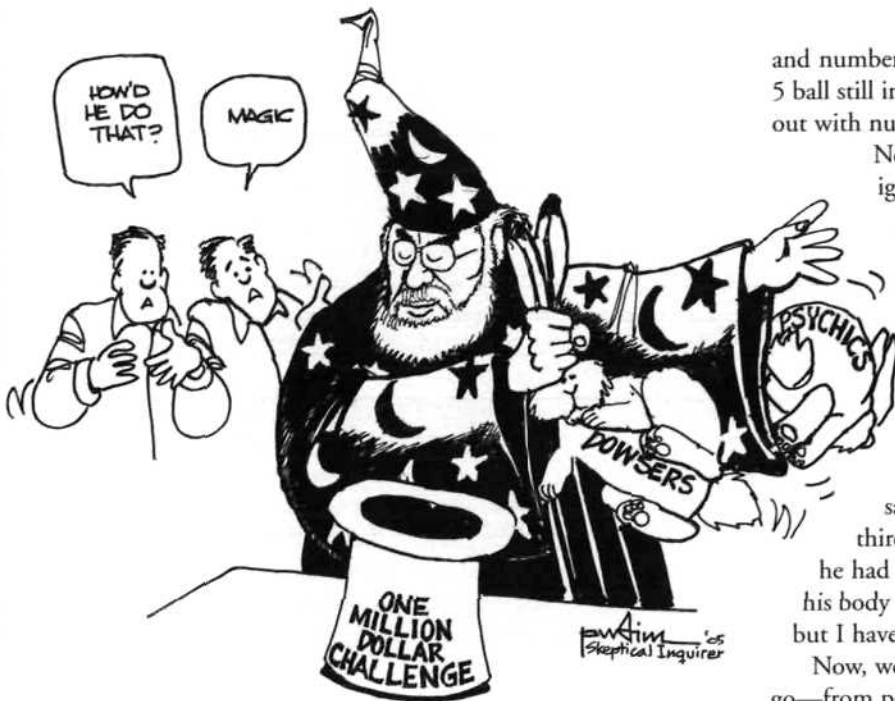
Just recently I was in Würzburg, in Germany, where we ran some tests of people who were applying for the prize. Again, so that the tension won't be too much for you, they all failed and the million dollars is still quite safe. There was a gentleman there who I won't name so that he won't be embarrassed. This is a scientist with a German university, retired, who said I cheat all the time, otherwise there would have been a winner a long time ago. And, he said, in some cases, people have already won the prize but I won't pay them. He also said that I'm too aggressive and rude.

Now, I can be aggressive, that's quite true. Yes, just try me and you'll see. But with these innocent people who are self-deceived, certainly I am not aggressive.

Well, this professor, he showed up in Würzburg and at first he was very angry about everything, and he looked at me with



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this awful expression on his face. After half an hour he was lightening up a little bit because he found that I was not the very bad person that he'd believed I was.

But then—it's hard to tell you this, really—he was doing tests that he wanted the million dollars for, but he wanted to see how I did the tests first, that's why he was in Würzburg. This man had said that he didn't like my attitude—all of those things. He showed up, he watched me do some of the tests, and he lightened up considerably, but then he showed his weakness. Now, this is an academic, a man with a university degree. I don't have a university degree. I'm merely someone who observes and uses common sense. You don't get a university degree for common sense, apparently.

This gentleman was doing tests with children in which he had a large bag, and inside were ping-pong balls numbered 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, etc., all the way up to 25, and the children were supposed to reach in and select any given number—ah-ha! There it is! I win!

Well, I wondered about that. What was his expertise in ping-pong balls? He showed me the bag. He laid it on the table, and Martin Mahner and I, who were there watching the tests, looked at one another in astonishment. The bag was made out of a netlike plastic material. You could read the numbers of the balls from outside the bag! You could see it very plainly, and on my Web site I have—I will have shortly—some photographs that I took with my digital camera where you can see the numbers through the bag.

Well, then I decided to test the man to see what his observing powers were, so I said, "Let me demonstrate." I reached into the bag and I took out a ball with number 3 on it, and I said, "That would be ball number 3." He said, "Yes." I put it aside and said, "Now I will choose ball number 5." Ball number 5!

He was astonished. Of course, now he assumed that I had psychic powers, too, you see? Well, I'll tell you the secret, it's very simple: when I reached in, I took two balls. One here, and one down here [shows hand] and I looked at both number 3

and number 5, and I said, "Number 3"—having the number 5 ball still in my hand—then I reached into the bag and came out with number 5. That's what had astonished him.

Now, that's two things in which he demonstrated his ignorance of scientific procedure. But then it really got to me. We had two thermometers laid there that were measuring the air temperature. He wanted to photograph them with his digital camera to make sure the two of them were reading exactly the same temperature. He reached down and took one of the thermometers and he turned it around so the numbers were facing his camera. He took the photograph, then he looked at the thermometers. He said, "Oh, this thermometer is reading about one-third of one degree Celsius higher." That was because he had picked it up by the bulb end so it was measuring his body temperature! *This is a scientist!* I am not a scientist, but I have common sense.

Now, we get claims all the time—as far as difficult claims go—from people asking, can we prove that God doesn't exist? Ah, but they have the wrong picture, you see? I don't say that any of these powers, including God, doesn't exist; I make no claim. I ask *them* to make the claim, and *they* have to prove that *they're* right. So they say, okay, "God exists." I say, "Prove it." "Ah, um, I'll call you back." "Hello?" and we never hear from them again.

Now, the other people who are difficult to test are those with very strong emotional investment in the tests. I'm a sympathetic man, I really am, I'm considerate of these people. They come to me and they want to be tested, but I know that when they fail the test, theoretically they should be very depressed, they should feel very sorry: "Oh, something's awfully wrong here." It will destroy their emotional stability. I don't want to do that, but in some cases it's not possible to avoid it.

For example: Linda, my administrative director, came to me recently and she said, "There're some people at the front door from Lithuania." Now, I'm in Florida. They came all the way from Lithuania because they were sure they could win the million-dollar prize. They said they could do psychic diagnosis of the human body, and I said, "Well, we're not ready for you. If you want to give a quick try, you can do that, sure. Ah, try me."

Now, that was unwise of me because many details about me are on the Web and can be found with the search engine Google. Google knows everything, you know that, yes? Google knows all facts. And I thought maybe they would look me up in Google. No, they weren't that smart.

The two women who came in did a complete analysis of my body, and they decided that I had every disease that a 74-year-old man *should* have. I don't have any of those. I have others, and they didn't spot any of the other ones, and I won't tell you what they are.

But it was so typical. They know that I should have prostate problems. I should have this. I should have other problems. But I didn't have any of those, and I said, "Now, you told me that you would be one-hundred percent correct." "Yes, yes,

yes.” And I said, “Well, here’s a medical examination from two months ago, there’s all the details there.” They just pushed it aside. I said, “But you aren’t a hundred percent correct.” “Oh, yes, yes! But we know things that the doctors don’t know.”

Okay . . . But, you see, that’s a very difficult thing to handle. How do you answer something like that? Of course, the point is they had not made out the application form, filled out the required documentation in advance, so the tests were not valid. However, the sad part of this is that the new president of Lithuania has now employed one of these woman as his official psychic! That’s a little worrisome. I wouldn’t go to Lithuania. Not now.

I don’t want to hear stories about what happened in the past, and the rules specifically say it must be here and now, with an experiment that we agree on and design together.

We had other sad cases, difficult situations. One Mexican man showed up at our door with an empty suitcase in his hand—to hold the million dollars. We asked him, through our interpreter, why he had come. He was a very poor man, and he’d come from Mexico, somehow, with this empty suitcase, and he said, “I can win the million dollars because I met a UFO out in the desert.” “Yes. . . ?” “And they spoke to me.” “Yes. . . ?” “And now I glow in the dark. You can see me in the dark.” “Okay, we can test that right now.”

So we took him into our library, which has no windows, it’s all dark inside, and I went and got two people off the street. I said, “Would you volunteer to do a scientific experiment?” “Oh, yes, of course.” So they came in, I put them in the room, put the man in the room, turned out the lights. I said, “Can you see this man?” They said, “What man?” I said, “The Mexican gentleman here says he glows in the dark.” “No, no.” “You can’t see him?” “No.”

We turned on the light again. I said, “They can’t see you,” and he replied, “Oh, I’m not feeling strong, I haven’t had breakfast yet.” I said, “Well, go and have breakfast, if you want, and come back.” “Oh, I will, I will.” He took his suitcase and he left. I didn’t see him again. He didn’t come back. But you have to feel sorry for people like this.

I also tested a group of children from an organization called *Instituto Más Vida*—the Institute for More Life. This is a group in Mexico that teaches children to see while blindfolded. Well, actually they don’t teach them to see while blindfolded, they teach them to *cheat* while blindfolded. When you give the children something written and they’re wearing a blindfold—you see them peeking . . . ah, yes, then they can read it, you see? Or if you hold it up here, they say, “What paper? Where? Where?” You hold it down here, way down here, they can see it, and they like to put it on their laps while they’re sitting in the chair, and then they read it like this, with their head tilted up.

So I simply take a little bit of tape and put it into their eye orbits over their eyelids so they cannot open their eyes, and they lose their psychic powers immediately. I tested them live on Japanese television, and another group like that in Korea. These are some of the difficult ones to handle because these are children, and you don’t want to be cruel to children. They’re doing a little joke. They don’t think it’s serious, but of course it can be very serious.

You must know that most of the people, the vast majority of people who come to be tested for the million-dollar prize, are innocent. They’re self-deluded. They’re not the fakers. Oh, I’ve had a few of those, but I get rid of them. I point where the trick is, good-bye, and they’re gone. But very few. Most of them are very innocent, so innocent that when you ask them, “How successful will this test be?” They always say, “One-hundred percent. I never miss.” That’s an easy test to do. As soon as they miss one . . . *arrivederci*. Goodbye. Out of here.

I have tested many people who said one-hundred percent, and I must tell you this to show you the poor understanding that some people have of statistics. On a program that we did for Lexington Broadcasting Corporation, before the million-dollar prize—for one hundred thousand dollars—I spoke with the producers and they said, “Now, we’ve got to be careful that we don’t lose our hundred thousand dollars.” I said, “Oh, yes, of course.” An astrologer applied, and he said, “If you give me twelve people from the audience who have their drivers licenses to prove what month and date they were born. . . .” “Yes. . . ?” “Make sure they’re twelve different signs of the Zodiac. . . .” “Yes. . . ?” “And I will ask them simple questions and I’ll be able to tell what their sign is.” “Okay.”

So we got twelve people and he asked them questions. He said things like, “When you see a motion picture in the theatre, do you like a comedy better than a drama? Ah, I see, that’s significant. Do you like red and orange better than you like blue and green? Ah, really?” And then at the end he gave them a piece of paper, sealed in an envelope, which had their sign, what he thought their Zodiacal sign was. There were twelve of them.

Now, I said to the producers, “This man says that he can get eleven out of twelve right. Think about that.” And they said, “No, it should be twelve.” I said, “No, I’d like to make it ten.” And they said, “Oh, no, that’s too easy, no, it’s too easy.” They didn’t understand that getting eleven out of twelve is *also* twelve out of twelve, and I tried to show them on paper, and they were saying, “No, no. We want twelve out of twelve.” “Okay.” This was the producer of the program and all of his staff. Strange, but nonetheless true.

Now, as I said, the major proportion of our claimants are dowzers, and they’re almost always innocent, except in two cases that happened—both in Australia. In one case we found the dowser asking the superintendent of a building where the pipes were under the ground before we got there. That’s not allowed, no. In the other case, a man had developed an elec-

tronic method of telling something about a machine. I won't get into all the details on that one, but only twice have dowzers ever actually tried to cheat to win the million dollars.

We just did tests, as I said, in Würzburg. Well, I'm always ready for a surprise. Würzburg wasn't very much of a surprise because the tests were more or less what I expected. One of them will really interest you. A man who said that if he took a bottle of water right from the store and passed his hand around it, it would taste better than the other bottle which he didn't affect.

Well, we tested that, and it was very easy to do. We gave him fifty trials, where after he left the room, the randomizing team would take samples from the treated bottle and put them into certain wine glasses and from the untreated bottle into other wine glasses. His chance was 50 percent—one in two—of being successful.

He was very pompous. "Oh, yes, I'm gonna win this prize, heh, heh, heh, I'm very successful at this." Well, at the end of the test, we showed him that he had gotten twenty-two correct out of fifty, when twenty-five would be expected by chance. Well, he has now called the GWUP [German skeptics group] and offered all kinds of excuses. One of the excuses was when he was [makes hand gestures] doing this, the other bottle was too close, because these powerful vibrations, you see, go out to the other bottle, too. Okay, well, we'll do it next time with them five meters apart, and then twenty meters apart, but I think he won't be back. They very seldom return to be tested again.

They get stranger and stranger. One man said that he had an object with him that he could dowse or divine with his pendulum. He had a piece of wire that he wiggled around, and he was very sensitive to this object. I said, "Use whatever object you want." Now, I thought it might be a piece of gold, or something like that. No, it was a little heart-shaped piece of soap. You don't ask questions of these people, you just say, "Okay, if that's what you say, we'll do it." So we did some "open" trials where he knew where the soap was in one of ten boxes, and he was successful every time because he knew, you see? But the pendulum went like mad! Over this box, nothing; this box, nothing; this box, nothing. Oh, there it goes! When he knew.

Well, then we had him do thirteen tests for another statistical reason. At the end of it he had gotten one correct out of the thirteen which is in good agreement with the one out of ten the chances were that he would have.

He said that he was very sensitive to this piece of mineral. I said, "If I conceal it in my hand, can you still detect it?"

He said, "Oh, yes!"

So I concealed it in my hand and the wire went like crazy. "Oh, but look," I said, showing that hand to be empty.

And, without pause, he said, "Oh, yes, I was detecting it from your other hand."

Now, that's what they do. To him, he had not lost the contest at all, he simply was detecting it in the other hand because his powers were so great.

Well, the "soap dowser," ah, failed. Goodbye. But then we had a man who could make a mask move. He took aluminum foil and pressed it onto his face, and took it off. That gave him a "mask." He suspended it on a fine hair, a human hair—not

The One Million Dollar Paranormal Challenge

At JREF [James Randi Educational Foundation], we offer a one-million-dollar prize to anyone who can show, under proper observing conditions, evidence of any paranormal, supernatural, or occult power or event. The JREF does not involve itself in the testing procedure, other than helping to design the protocol and approving the conditions under which a test will take place. All tests are designed with the participation and approval of the applicant. In most cases, the applicant will be asked to perform a relatively simple preliminary test of the claim, which if successful, will be followed by the formal test. Preliminary tests are usually conducted by associates of the JREF at the site where the applicant lives. Upon success in the preliminary testing process, the "applicant" becomes a "claimant."

To date, no one has ever passed the preliminary tests.

Your claim casts you in the role of the defendant, and the only thing the JREF asks of you in defending your claim, is to *demonstrate* it. No theories, no stories, no anecdotal evidence, no photographs, no tape recordings; just a simple demonstration. Nothing more is required. The Challenge rules may seem complicated upon first glance, but they are not. You have a paranormal claim? Great! Demonstrate it successfully, and the Million Dollar Prize is yours. It's really that simple.

—From the James Randi Educational Foundation
Web site (www.randi.org)

from me, obviously!—inside a sealed container, and naturally it sat there and very slowly turned, then it very slowly turned back, very, very slowly. We said, "Okay, we'll give you the instruction when it will turn and when it will *not* turn." But it never stopped turning. Back and forth, all the time, going, going, going, and he couldn't understand that, either.

This is the kind of people who are innocent; they really believe they have the powers. This "mask" man has since come up with excuses as to why he failed. But there are some cases that are impossible, absolutely impossible, and most of those cases are created by the claimant's lawyers. Remember lawyers? You've seen them, yes, I'm sure you have them in Italy, too. The lawyers often make it impossible, because for months and months they exchange letters. We want to change this rule, we want to change that rule, we want to take this adjective out, we want to change this number and, okay. . . . Yawn. And we go on and on and on with the lawyers. So most of the cases that it's impossible to test, it's because of the lawyers.

But there are others, too. . . . You may think that I'm making these up. I don't have to invent these things. In fact, I

could not invent these crazy claims like the heart-shaped piece of soap. That would take Victor Hugo or some other great fiction artist to create. I couldn't create them.

There are two brothers in Dubai, Arab Emirate. They sent an e-mail saying, "We want the million dollars." I said, "Okay, why?" "Well, because the two of us make the sun rise every morning."

Well, I thought about that. I wonder how we could design a test? So I said, wait, wait, this may be just a joke. Well, whether it is or not, I'll treat it as if it's serious. So I wrote back to them and I said, "Which one of you makes it rise?" "Um, we don't know. We both work on it and the sun rises every morning, you can see that." I said, "Yes, the evidence is 100 percent in your favor." Then I said, "I have an experiment. One of you shoot the other one. Then if the sun rises the next morning, it wasn't him. Must be you. Well, then, what you do is you shoot yourself, and if the sun rises the next morning, you lose. But if the sun doesn't rise the next morning, I'll pay you." I don't think we've heard back from them.

The worst things that are impossible to test are the anecdotal stories. Anecdotal stories like "Oh, my grandmother did this, she did that." I wasn't there, I don't know your grandmother, I don't want to hear stories about what happened in the past, and the rules specifically say it must be here and now, with an experiment that we agree on and design together. But anecdotal stories are by far the greatest part of it.

Now, another test in Würzburg. A lady showed up with her husband, and she said if we provided her pictures of people, she would be able to tell if these people had heart conditions. Okay, that's a good test. So we got her thirty-eight photographs of people of all ages and different genders and a great variety of people, and we knew from medical examinations and from medical records that some of these people—approximately half of them—had very obvious heart conditions for which they were being treated. For the others, EKGs checked them out perfectly. No problems with their hearts.

Well, she also said that she would be one hundred percent correct. By chance, she should have identified nineteen out of the thirty-eight samples that she had. She was using the strangest method I ever saw in my life. It was a combination of Therapeutic Touch, Chinese pulse reading, and applied kinesiology—forcing the arm up and down—all *done on her husband while he held the photograph!* Don't look at me like that, that's her idea, not mine. Well, she got eighteen correct out of thirty-eight, just less than chance. Well, now, of course, she's also written to GWUP with all kinds of excuses, and now she wants her lawyers to stop me from publishing this information. I have just published that information. Now, go ahead, stop me.

This is difficult in many ways, this whole subject of testing people. It's difficult from a moral point of view. Now, a person like Uri Geller—you remember him? He used to bend spoons. There's an occupation for you! "Mr. Geller, what do you do for a living?" "I bend spoons." "Do you straighten spoons, too?" "No, no, I just bend them. . . ." I ask you: has bending spoons ever moved humanity forward one little bit? No. He's been doing it for thirty years and our history hasn't changed one bit. Hasn't made any difference whatsoever!

People like Geller say they don't want to take the million-dollar prize—well, for many excuses. "There's no million dollars." Well, there is. "And you won't give it to me." I have to, under the law; I don't have any choice. But Geller's reason is very unique. He says, "No, I won't try for the million dollars, because I don't like James Randi."

Wait a minute. If he doesn't like me, why doesn't he take my million dollars? You show me somebody I don't like who wants to give me a million dollars, I'll take it, right away, and be very happy about it.

I'll close with some comments on what should be done when you do these tests. Some people have said, "Oh, with Geller, give him a spoon, an 'industrial-strength' spoon that nobody can bend." No, you have to do it *their way*, under *their* circumstances. You have to give them as much play as you can. The point is not to prevent them from doing it, but to catch them at the trick, if there is a trick. Catch them, because otherwise you have no evidence.

Always get statements in advance. From all of the people who apply, of the about two to three percent who get through the first process just to do the preliminary test, I get statements in advance. I ask them, what are the statistics that you will agree to, and what will happen if you don't succeed? That's the interesting question. I say to them, "If you fail in this test, what will your conclusion be?"

And they say, "Oh, I don't have to answer that because I know I will win."

"Well, wait a minute, just get crazy in your head, just suppose that maybe you won't win the million dollars. What will your conclusion be?"

They say, "Oh, well, then I haven't got the power."

At that point, I give them a sealed envelope and I say, "Open that up after the test." I say, "Now, you won't have any excuses?"

"No, no. No, no. I know I'm going to win, I won't make any excuses."

Okay. They do the test, they fail, and immediately they say, "Oh, well, it was Thursday, that's a bad day for me." Or, "Jupiter was in Sagittarius. That's a very bad combination for me." Or it was too hot or it was too cold, whatever. They always have excuses.

I say, "Open the envelope."

Inside the envelope it says, "Though you agreed not to make any excuses, you have now made the excuses. I have the power of prophesy. I should win the million dollars. In fact, I think I will."

People have asked me a very important question: What would happen if somebody did win the million dollars? Now, I don't think it's likely, I think it's very highly unlikely. But I would gladly pay the million dollars because it would mean that all of us, the whole world, would know a new aspect of science that never existed before. In fact, that discovery would overturn science completely, and scientists don't mind that. They're prepared to be reversed, because that gives them a better knowledge of the universe. So if I have to pay the million dollars, oh, it would hurt, yes, but I would also be very happy. That would be my investment in increasing the knowledge of human beings, and we are all human beings. Let's celebrate that fact. □