

Phactum

The Newsletter of the Philadelphia Association for Critical Thinking

www.phact.org

December 2006



Christmas Message, 1968

by Tom Napier

*We see the Earth, a blue-white ball
Surrounded by an empty night,
Whose distances can dwindle all
Our greatest feats to points of light.*

*Until this time the Earth had seemed
An ample stage to speak our lines.
Our play looks slighter than we'd dreamed
Seen from beyond the Earth's confines.*

*Yet venturing out we find no place,
No other home for fragile man.
We only have this cage in space,
Our masque will end where it began.*

*Unless we force our prison bars
And take our place among the stars.*

Copyright (c) 1988, Tom Napier

PHACT CALENDAR

Friday, December 22, 2006 - annual **PhACT Winter Solstice Party** will be at 6:30 PM until late in the evening - email Eric: at erickrieg@verizon.net for details and directions. This event is free but is strictly for PhACT members and their guests only. Bring some goodies to share.

Saturday, January 20, 2007 - ACLU chapter board member Bill Ewing will speak on issues of free speech.

Saturday, February 17, 2007 - Princeton University Professor Tom Delworth, a geophysicist, will speak on Global Warming.

Until December 31, 2006: Special Darwin exhibit at **The Franklin Institute of Science**, at 20th and Benjamin Franklin Parkway in Philadelphia. For more details: <http://www2.fi.edu/exhibits/traveling/darwin.php>

Wagner Free Institute of Science Lecture series: Wednesday, January 17, 2007, beginning at 6:30 PM. **The Dog and Its DNA**, Professor Mary Beth Davis. Independence Branch of the Free Library, 18 S. 7th Street (7th and Market Streets). 7 Wednesdays. This course will examine the Canine Genome Project and cover the evolutionary history of the domestic dog. Diversity of dog breeds, behavior, and specialization will be some of the topics discussed. *No preregistration required.* Free.

Wagner Free Institute of Science Lecture series: Thursday, January 18, 2007, beginning at 6:30 PM. **Perching Birds of the World**, Professor Nathan H. Rice. Academy of Natural Sciences, 19th Street and the Benjamin Franklin Parkway. 6 Thursdays. This class will focus on songbirds, the largest and most diverse clade of modern birds and includes a behind-the-scenes tour of the Academy's bird collection. *Preregistration required. To preregister, call 215-763-6529, ext. 23, beginning November 13, 2006. This class is limited to 12 students.* Free.

Wagner Free Institute of Science lecture series: Saturday, January 27, 2007, beginning at 10:15 AM. **Earth & Life Through Time: Historical Geology**, Professor William Gallagher. University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, 33rd and Spruce Streets. 10 Saturdays. From the Precambrian rocks and fossils through the Late Cenozoic ice ages, this course examines early life on earth. *No preregistration required.* Free.

Ongoing: The Philadelphia Paranormal Research & Investigative Group. Seeking evidence of the existence of ghosts and spirits. 2nd Sunday each month at 6 PM. Essene

Café & Market. 719 South Fourth Street, Philadelphia. More info: Richard Longo 215-200-5245, <http://ghosts.meetup.com/87/>.

Ongoing: Freethought Society of Greater Philadelphia (FSGP) and the Humanist Association of Greater Philadelphia (HAGP) co-sponsor a monthly book discussion club. The book club meets on the third Saturday of each month at 7:00 PM at Willow Grove Barnes & Noble, 102 Park Avenue, Willow Grove, Pennsylvania 19090. If you have any questions, please contact the book club moderator, Ian Thomas. Email: ian.thomas101@gmail.com Phone: (610) 368-5915 Cell: (610) 565-4530.

Ongoing: Penn Science Café is a lecture series hosted by PhACT member Greg Lester. Scientists and engineers from University of Pennsylvania discuss their work at a level accessible to the layman. Events are on the last Monday of each month at 6:00 PM at the MarBar, 40th & Walnut Streets. Lectures are free and open to the public.

Ongoing: The Wagner Free Institute of Science offers an assortment of science lectures presented at the introductory college level by professors from various universities around Philadelphia. These courses are free and vary from a single night to an eight week course. See their website at <http://www.wagnerfreeinstitute.org/>.

The PhACT Calendar is open to members, and non-members too, who wish to announce meetings and events of other groups of which they are interested or affiliated. These events should be of some general interest to the Skeptical or Scientific community and should be within a reasonable radius of Philadelphia. Send submissions to the editor at phactpublicity@aol.com. Keep the announcements brief. Space is limited and insertions will be made on a first come-first served basis after the needs of PhACT are accomplished.

Various Ruminations

Collected/written by Ray Haupt, editor

About the Poem on Page 1.

We know Tom Napier as a Physicist and Skeptic and now he has added another dimension: Poet.

Author's note: I wrote the first version of this poem in early 1969 after seeing the photographs of the Earth taken by the Apollo 8 astronauts. Twenty years later I recast it as a sonnet and gave it a more optimistic conclusion. Since its message is, ultimately, pro science I hope it is appropriate for Phactum.

A Very Merry Christmas ... is surely in store for Jim Bergin and Judy Garvey in Maine. They were at one time members of the Gentle Winds Project, a cultish organization specializing in flim-flam New Age health products. Jim and Judy broke away and actively worked against GWP. GWP filed suit claiming defamation that caused donations to be impacted. The Judge, however did not agree and the Gentle Winds Project is legally out of business. This was a long, painful, and expensive experience. The court verdict was a great personal victory for Jim and Judy and also a was victory for Critical Thinking. There will be more about Gentle Winds Project in future editions of Phactum. Congratulations Jim and Judy and do enjoy this very special holiday season.

Frontier Science sounds like a wild west shoot out, but its not.

The Skeptic side of Tom Napier, not the poetic, reports that the Spring/Summer 2006 edition of Frontier Perspectives contains yet another explanation of how dowsing works; this time it's due to sudden changes in ground conductivity. The author leaves us with the charming thought that dowsing can be used to locate landmines. It is gratifying to hear of yet another mechanism by which natural selection can improve the gene pool.

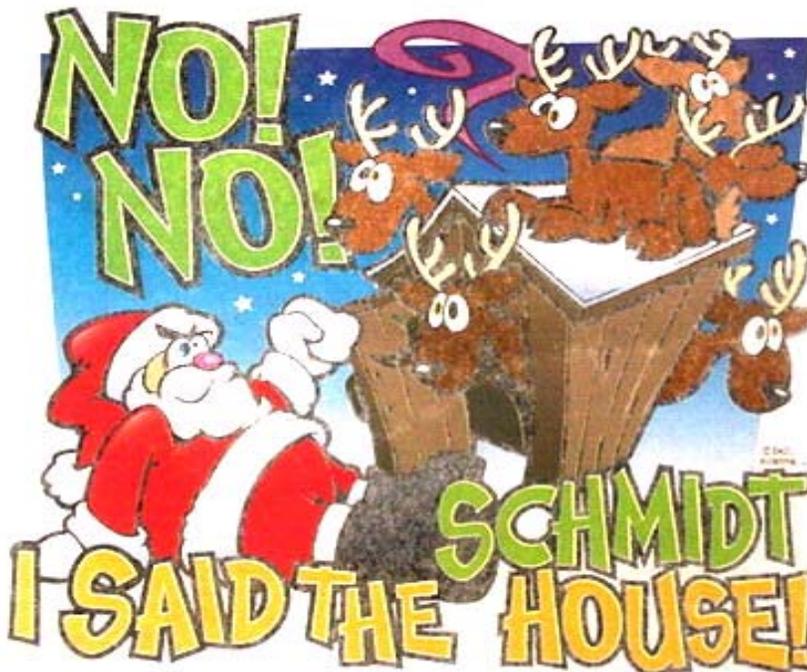
Frontier Perspectives is published by The Center for Frontier Science at Temple University. Visit their website at <http://www.temple.edu/cfs> to access their calendar of fascinating scientific activities which include a series of Iyengar Yoga Workshops in Philadelphia and the ISSSEEM Seventeenth Annual Conference in Boulder, Colorado from June 21st-27th,

2006, the theme being "The Science of the Miraculous" which among other things will consider immeasurable healing energies. ISSSEEM, by the way, is the acronym for International Society for the Study of Subtle Energies and Energy Medicine.

Don't want to be hasty

It is good to know that Philadelphia City Officials are well versed in mathematics.

The Philadelphia Inquirer has reported that the Board of Revision of Taxes (BRT), the property tax



authority in Philadelphia, has for several years been pondering the notion of changing the formula for property tax assessment. The current formula requires the BRT to derive a number equal to 70% of the value of a real estate property based on its Fair Market Value. That number is then multiplied by a preset factor of 0.32; the resultant number being the assessed property value. The assessed value is then multiplied by the millage rate and viola!! The tax on a home or other property has been computed.

Various civic reformers and other pests have been agitating to change the assessed property tax formula to be based on 100% of Fair Market Valuation. This formula change was to be accomplished by 2008. The BRT, however, has postponed that date until at least 2009 because of its complexity. More study is needed they say, and anyway, using 100% valuation is oh so boring and hardly as charming as 32% of 70% of 100%.

Warning about Internet Untruth

Becky Strickland has gleaned this little item from The Guardian.

"There is a danger that untruths start to spread



more than truths" Tim Berners-Lee, the creator of the World Wide Web, on the danger that "bad phenomena" will start to erode the Internet's usefulness. In particular, the rise of blogging means users take on trust information that can be inaccurate and defamatory. Reported in 'The Guardian' of London, November 3rd, 2006.

The truth of Mr. Berners-Lee's contention is amply demonstrated on page 5 where a physicist attempts to de-bunk Santa Claus.

Christmas presents and goodies to all except Bill Kearney

For Bill it will be coal in the Christmas stocking if the Pennsylvania Gaming Control Board, various gambling interests, and most of the state legislature have any say in the matter. There is little doubt too, that those same parties are sticking pins in effigy dolls.

You probably have not heard of Bill Kearney, but he has been in the news, and we hope to present more information about him and his cause in future Phactums. Bill Kearney was at one time an addicted gambler. He paid a heavy price and is now crusading against gambling in Pennsylvania. Here is the URL for an article about Bill and his mission: <http://www.philly1.com/story3071305.html>.



Unfortunately slot parlour gambling has

commenced in Pennsylvania at a casino in the Wilkes Barre area which opened in November. A casino is scheduled to open before New Year at Philadelphia Park, a race track just outside the city in Bucks County.

When construction finally ends, according to current laws, there will be 14 casinos in Pennsylvania. The government of our Commonwealth is planning for Pennsylvanians and others to lose \$250 million per month in order to accomplish other "good works", such as property tax reduction. Whatever happened to the quaint notion that government be at least somewhat protective of its citizens, not shills for vice industries?

About Metanexus, a Philadelphia organization reconciling science and religion

The Metanexus Institute advances research, education and outreach on the constructive engagement of science and religion. They seek to create an enduring intellectual and social movement by collaborating with persons and communities from diverse religious traditions and scientific disciplines.

Metanexus Institute, 3624 Market Street, Suite 301, Philadelphia, PA 19104. 215-789-2200

www.metanexus.net

The GOP

No... not that GOP, not the one that we variously love or hate. The other GOP, Global Orgasm for Peace, organized by peace activist Cindy Sheehan and others, plans to create an energy vortex through Global Orgasm on December 22nd. This activity will take place at the same time as the Phact Winter Solstice Party.

The intent is that the participants concentrate any thoughts during and after orgasm on peace. The combination of high-energy orgasmic energy combined with mindful intention may have a much greater effect than previous mass meditations and prayers.

The goal is to add so much concentrated and high-energy positive input into the energy field of the Earth that it will reduce the current dangerous levels of aggression and violence throughout the world.

This is the First Annual Solstice Synchronized Global Orgasm for Peace, leading up to the December Solstice of 2012, when the Mayan Calendar ends with a new beginning.

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Is there a Santa Claus? a physicist view

Consider the following:

1) No known species of reindeer can fly. But there are 300,000 species of living organisms yet to be classified, and while most of these are insects and germs, this does not COMPLETELY rule out flying reindeer which only Santa has ever seen.

2) There are 2 billion children (persons under 18) in the world. BUT since Santa doesn't (appear) to handle the Muslim, Hindu, Jewish and Buddhist children, that reduces the workload to 15% of the total - 378 million according to Population Reference Bureau. At an average (census) rate of 3.5 children per household, that's 91.8 million homes. One presumes there's at least one good child in each.

3) Santa has 31 hours of Christmas to work with, thanks to the different time zones and the rotation of the earth, assuming he travels east to west (which seems logical).

This works out to 822.6 visits per second. This is to say that for each Christian household with good children, Santa has 1/1000th of a second to park, hop out of the sleigh, jump down the chimney, fill the stockings, distribute the remaining presents under the tree, eat whatever snacks have been left, get back up the chimney, get back into the sleigh and move on to the next house.

Assuming that each of these 91.8 million stops are evenly distributed around the earth (which, of course, we know to be false but for the purposes of our calculations we will accept), we are now talking about .78 miles per household, a total trip of 75-1/2

million miles, not counting stops to do what most of us must do at least once every 31 hours, plus feeding and etc.

This means that Santa's sleigh is moving at 650 miles per second, 3,000 times the speed of sound. For purposes of comparison, the fastest man-made vehicle on earth, the Ulysses space probe, moves at a poky 27.4 miles per second - a conventional reindeer can run, tops, 15 miles per hour.

BifSniff.com



The greatest trick that Santa ever pulled was convincing the world he didn't exist.

4) The payload on the sleigh adds another interesting element. Assuming that each child gets nothing more than a medium-sized lego set (2 pounds), the sleigh is carrying 321,300 tons, not counting Santa, who is invariably described as overweight.

On land, conventional reindeer can pull no more than 300 pounds. Even granting that 'flying reindeer' (see point #1) could pull TEN TIMES the normal amount, we cannot do the job with eight, or even nine.

We need 214,200 reindeer. This increases the payload - not even counting the weight of the sleigh - to 353,430 tons. Again, for comparison - this is four times the weight of the Queen Elizabeth.

5) 353,000 tons traveling at 650 miles per second creates enormous air resistance - this will heat the reindeer up in the same fashion as spacecraft re-entering the earth's atmosphere. The lead pair of reindeer will absorb 14.3 QUINTILLION joules of energy. Per second. Each.

In short, they will burst into flame almost instantaneously, exposing the reindeer behind them, and create deafening sonic booms in their wake. The entire reindeer team will be vaporized within 4.26 thousandths of a second.

Santa, meanwhile, will be subjected to centrifugal forces 17,500.06 times greater than gravity. A 250-

pound Santa (which seems ludicrously slim) would be pinned to the back of his sleigh by 4,315,015 pounds of force.> In conclusion - If Santa ever DID deliver presents on Christmas Eve, he's dead now.

Editors note: The author of this piece is unknown. Surely he is a physics major with time on his hands.

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Book Review

Malignant Medical Myths: Why MEDICAL Treatment Causes 200,000 Deaths in the USA each Year, and How to Protect Yourself
by Joel M. Kauffman, Ph.D., a
longtime member of PhACT

Paperback: 326 pages
Publisher: Infinity Publishing
(January 30, 2006)
Language: English
ISBN: 0741429098

Reviewed by Tony Noxon

In Joseph Conrad's famous novel, "Heart of Darkness," Marlowe, the narrator of the central tale travels to the Congo in search of the enigmatic and elusive Kurtz, a renowned European ivory trader who went to Africa as an idealistic "emissary of pity, and science, and progress." Marlowe finally encounters Kurtz on his deathbed, in a compound surrounded by a ruined fence, the posts of which are capped with shrunken human heads. Kurtz, having succumbed to primitive, destructive forces-- both external and internal-- utters his last words--a withering realization of truth: "The horror! The horror!"

Readers of Joel Kauffman's book "Malignant Medical Myths" should prepare themselves for an analagous journey of discovery. Not only will they learn of the specifics: that taking an aspirin a day may not make you live longer; that low carbohydrate diets are beneficial, not dangerous; that statin drugs, while effective in reducing cholesterol--an irrelevant endpoint--do little to reduce mortality--and then only in a

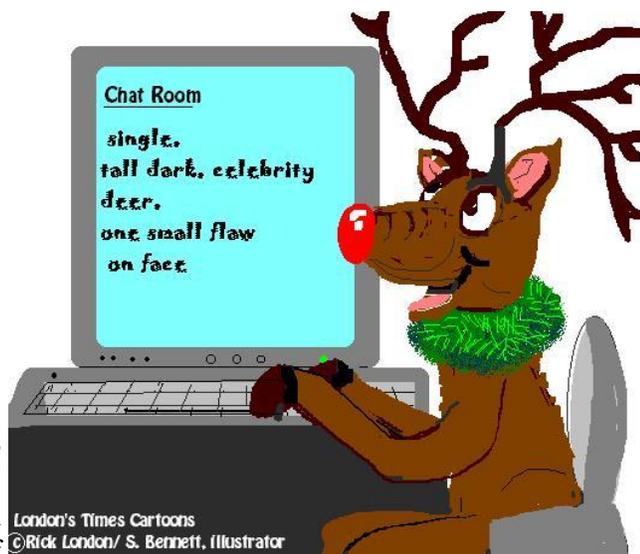
very select population; that high blood pressure is over-treated; that the benefits of moderate alcohol use, exercise, and mammograms are exaggerated; that chelation therapy is unfairly maligned; that fears of radiation are overdone; that cancer cure rates have not changed much in the last forty years.

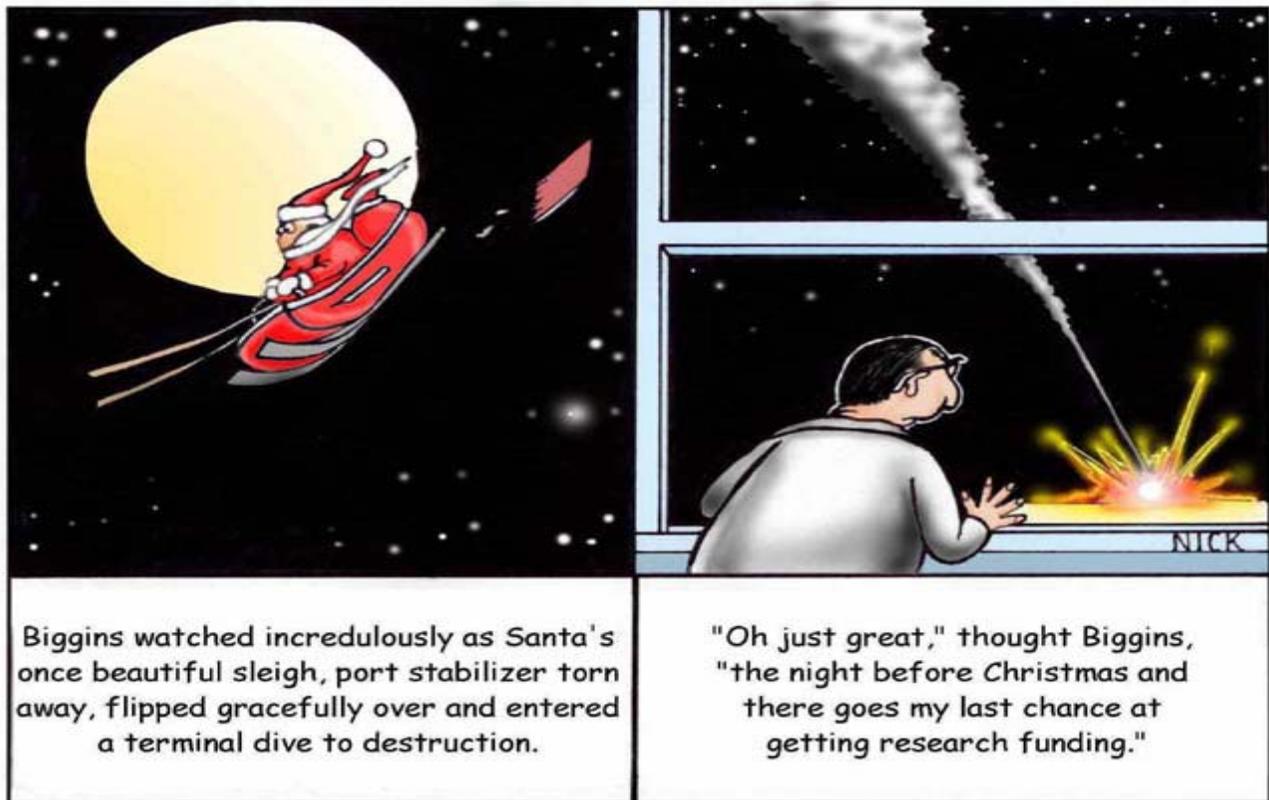
More important than these specifics is the totality--the picture of the medical establishment which emerges from them. That establishment, like Kurtz, is often seen as a beacon of pity, and science, and progress, but, when examined more closely, seems corrupted by greed, an aversion to truth, and a kind of tribalistic conformity; it seems to lack the structures which would provide an ethical backbone, and promote a commitment to scientific thinking. The hospital compound, with its white coats and gleaming machines is shadowed and compromised by an ominous fence of grievous errors and unpleasant truths.

The first subheading in Dr. Kauffman's introductory chapter is: "You Do Not Have To Trust Your Doctor." The reasons gradually become clear: Doctors' recommendations often rely on information which is "outdated, biased, flawed, and sometimes based on outright fraud."

Drug companies manipulate the results of clinical trials by careful selection of volunteers, by elimination of those who show initial adverse side-effects, by publishing only favorable results, by dealing only with surrogate endpoints, by failing to use placebos, and by failing to provide total mortality figures. Relative risk statistics, which are often highly misleading are used to advantage. Abstracts of medical papers, and hence press releases, may contain selective and hence misleading information. Doctors may not only rely on information given by drug company representatives; they are feted, gifted, and even paid by drug companies. Doctors on decision-making committees and panels often have conflicts of interest because of financial ties to drug companies. Doctors have great difficulty in exercising independent judgement, because conformity to current thinking, no matter how mistaken, is the safest course.

"The horror! the horror!" We should be grateful





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