

No smoke and mirrors at skeptics' convention

The rule in Las Vegas is not "What happens in Vegas stays in Vegas." The rule is, "The cab driver from the airport will be a patriotic Russian-speaking immigrant." I know because it's happened every time I've been to Sin City.

Of course, my sample size is small, and the drivers might not be telling the truth. Maybe they're part of some elaborate con game to swindle me out of something.

Do I sound skeptical? That's why I'm in Vegas. I'm presenting work at TAM5, the largest conference of critical thinkers in the world. TAM stands for The Amazing Meeting, named after the "Amazing" magician-turned-debunker James Randi. Astrology? Nonsense. Psychic powers? No evidence. Telekinesis? Fails every test. On all these fronts, Randi has led the charge.

All evidence for weird phenomena disappears once you remove self-deception, confirmation bias and wishful thinking. There are better explanations that don't require supernatural forces, so intellectual honesty demands that we accept them. When we get the extraordinary evidence that backs extraordinary claims, we'll change our minds. That's what skeptics do.

Why is astrology false? Because its predictions are no different from chance. Because in a room of people given the exact same horoscope, everybody will rate it as a "good match" or better. Because astrologers never chart the influence of a planet until science discovers it. What more do you need?

OK, so maybe you'll accept that astrology is bunk, but what about those amazing coincidences that just can't be chance? Like when you were thinking about your mother, and the next minute she called you? Doesn't that mean you and your mother have a telepathic connection?

Actually, no. There are very good reasons why people tend to remember coincidences that happen and forget ones that don't. People "remember hits, forget misses." Try keeping a record of all the times you think of someone in your life. Write down the times they actually call you. Draw your own conclusions.

Still, sitting around saying "Phooey!" for three days would make a lousy conference. We had a blast, because we love what we do.



OPINION

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We think the world as we find it is exciting, inspiring and beautiful. We want to get out the good news, and we had celebrities to help tell us how.

Penn and Teller, Adam Savage from "Mythbusters," Trey Parker and Matt Stone (the creators of "South Park") were all there, just hanging out in their street clothes and talking with the rest of us. No entourage and no pretense. Despite their fame, they seemed very comfortable being themselves.

This struck me as rather unusual behavior for the rich and famous, so I spent some time trying to understand why. On the last day, I figured it out. Skeptics are immune to charisma.

We don't do the whole hysterical screaming, jumping-up-and-down thing, because we know there isn't anything particularly special about famous people. The same things that make people believe in psychic powers and alien abductions are the same things that make people go nuts over celebrities. Add a little self-questioning, and things return to normal.

Without a doubt, though, the high point was The Amazing Randi himself. He left during one session to go live on CNN and take on "psychic" Sylvia Brown.

Most of you know about the kidnapped boy in Missouri, Shawn Hornbeck, and his astonishing emergence recently from four years of captivity. Several months ago, Sylvia Brown met Shawn's mother and stepfather on the Montel Williams show. She used her psychic powers to tell them Shawn was dead. CNN played the tape, and Randi let her have it.

Purveyors of nonsense who prey on the gullible, like Sylvia Brown, rely on "remember hits, forget misses" to exploit desperate and vulnerable people. In our new media-intensive world, one of the best uses of media is to make sure people remember misses. You'll be seeing that here from time to time.

I came away from TAM5 renewed, refreshed, and recommitted to exposing nonsense wherever it lies. Far from being negative and threatening, I find it inspiring and fulfilling. I hope, in time, that you will too.

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