

In Memoriam James “The Amazing” Randi. (1928 – 2020)

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James Randi, born Randall Zwinge in Toronto, Canada, was not a parapsychologist or indeed, a scientist of any sort, but over the years came to have a rather close association with the field in many ways, most of which are well-known. He began his career as a stage magician and “escapologist” in 1946. It was an incident that occurred during his teenage years that would inspire his future, though; after encountering a pastor who claimed to be able to read minds, he re-enacted the pastor’s performance before the church’s congregation and was briefly arrested and imprisoned as a result (Limbong, 2020).

In 1972, Randi came to the attention of parapsychologists when he began to accuse Uri Geller of being a fraud. Their conflicts would continue over decades, resulting in multiple lawsuits and arguably Randi’s best-known book, *Flim-Flam: Psychics, ESP, Unicorns, and Other Delusions* (Randi, 1982). In 1973, Geller appeared on *The Tonight Show* with Johnny Carson, expecting to be interviewed. Instead, Carson followed Randi’s advice and insisted that he demonstrate his paranormal powers using materials Carson had provided. Geller was unable to perform, and Randi believed this was the end of Geller’s claims — and even Geller himself believed his career might be over. But instead, the public believed that if Geller had been a fraud he would have been prepared, and his tricks would have worked perfectly. His failure on this occasion was taken as a demonstration that he was genuine (Frum, 2000, p. 132).

Randi’s response to this was to create, along with Ray Hyman and Martin Gardner, the Committee for Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal (CSICOP), and they were later joined by Isaac Asimov, Carl Sagan, and Paul Kurtz (Higginbotham, 2014). The organization, for which Randi was the primary public face, gained considerable fame over the next few years for “debunking” various paranormal claims. The next year he founded the James Randi Educational Foundation (JREF). The JREF for several years offered a one-million-dollar paranormal prize (the “Million Dollar Challenge”), to anyone who could demonstrate paranormal abilities under controlled conditions.

This prize was never awarded to anyone, was restricted to “public figures” in 2007, and discontinued in 2015. That it was never awarded is hardly surprising (McLuhan, 2010), considering the conditions under which the tests were conducted. A good example can be found in Randi’s treatment of Natalya Lulova, a ten-year-old girl who apparently could read when totally blindfolded. In preliminary tests she did well and seemed poised to claim the prize. But Randi got personally involved, almost encas-

ing the girl’s head in tape and insisting that she perform over and over (while accusing her of cheating and making odd comments about her facial anatomy) until she no longer could perform (Komissarov, 2004). Several other examples of this sort can be found in the article on Randi in the *Psi Encyclopedia* (Wehrstein & McLuhan, (2020).

Randi did, in fact, expose many fraudulent claims of the paranormal. But on the whole, he was not, as he often claimed, an “investigator” rather than a “debunker.” Even a cursory look at his “investigations” shows that he virtually always approached the subject with the preconception that the claimant was a fraud. He shared, or perhaps can be said to have initiated, two attitudes that pervade his work and the work of skeptics in general. One, that if something can be simulated by fraudulent means, it was accomplished by fraudulent means, and two, that the laws of nature are currently well-enough known to scientists that nothing can or ever will be discovered that might violate any of them. Neither of these are logical propositions. Randi is often held up as an icon of rational and critical thinking, and clearly, neither he nor the other skeptics are. Yet they have numerous followers world-wide, especially students who feel that Randi’s style of aggressive skepticism marks them as intellectual and sophisticated. Almost certainly, this also contributes significantly to the hostility scientific parapsychology receives from academia. It is damaging, not just to parapsychology but to science as a whole. The damage James Randi did to science in his lifetime will doubtlessly endure for many years to come.

References

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