

**OUTSIDE THE BOX** In this room, Nelson's theory of a planetwide field of consciousness is no laughing matter

the *National Enquirer* shows up first here.

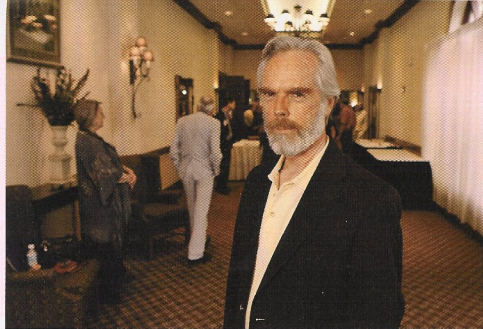
But what also shows up is a surprising attitude of skepticism. "We get plenty of nonsense," admits Charles Tolbert, an astronomer at the University of Virginia and the S.S.E.'s president. "Sometimes you know just five minutes into a talk that it's absurd. But you also hear things that make you think." Like Tolbert, many of the scientists here are on the faculty at major universities, and were doing fine at conventional research. But sometimes that gets boring. "I was plodding along, adding a

little to a large body of knowledge," says Garret Moddel, an engineering professor at the University of Colorado. "Doing experiments on parapsychology is a lot more interesting and potentially much more important."

At the back of their minds, those researchers always remember that the scientific establishment has a long history of scoffing at big, implausible ideas that ultimately turned out to be correct: the assertion that the Earth orbits the sun, the idea that brain-wasting diseases are caused by misshapen proteins, the proposition that hand washing can prevent doctors from transmitting disease, the claim that continents can drift across the surface of the world—all these and more were scorned at first.

While S.S.E. members know that scorn doesn't prove that a controversial idea is right (people laughed at Darwin, after all, but they also laughed at Bozo the Clown), it doesn't prove an idea is wrong, either. "What we do," says Nelson, "is give everyone a respectful hearing. If we think a speaker is doing bad science, we consider it our duty to criticize it. We get our share of lunatics, but they don't hang around long."

Given this remarkable mix of acceptance and skepticism, it's not so surprising, then, that Henry Bauer, the editor of S.S.E.'s journal and a dean emeritus at Virginia Tech, wrote the definitive treatise debunking Immanuel Velikovsky, whose best-selling books in the 1950s argued that Old Testament miracles were triggered by close encounters with Venus. But it's also not surprising that that same Henry Bauer has published papers arguing that scientists have ignored powerful evidence that the Loch Ness Monster is real. ■



## Science on the Fringe

ESP, UFOs and reincarnation are treated with respect at the world's most bizarre scientific conference

By **MICHAEL D. LEMONICK** GAINESVILLE

**R**OGER NELSON'S FORMAL CREDENTIALS are in the respectable field of experimental psychology, but the project he has been working on since 1998 would make plenty of scientists cringe. Nelson heads the Global Consciousness Project, which is based on the theory that emotionally charged world events will cause blips in the output of random-number generators scattered around the globe. He and his colleagues believe they have already documented that effect in the aftermath of Princess Di's death, the 9/11 attacks and, more benignly, in the wave of international optimism that seems to settle over the world each New Year's Day. The simple electronic devices that generate the random numbers, he argues, may be picking up some sort of planetwide field of consciousness.

Nelson would have a tough time getting this stuff published in a major journal like *Science* or *Nature*. But he doesn't have to, thanks to an organization called the Society for Scientific Exploration, or S.S.E., which held its annual meeting outside Gainesville, Fla., last week. The location—a Best Western overlooking Interstate 75—wasn't quite so lavish as the conference centers where neurologists or physicists routinely meet. Yet that didn't seem to matter for the hundred or

so researchers who came to hear learned talks on, among other things, consciousness physics, astrology and parapsychology. Here, and in the society's *Journal of Scientific Exploration*, such topics are standard fare, alongside research on reincarnation, UFOs and near-death experiences. Pretty much anything that might have shown up on *The X-Files* or in

### RIGHT AFTER ALL

These three men were denounced for radical ideas that eventually became part of mainstream scientific theory



**CHARLES DARWIN:**  
The theory of evolution flew in the face of what the Bible taught, which put him at odds with religious leaders



**ALFRED WEGENER:**  
He had powerful evidence on his side, but geologists were sure that continental drift was impossible. Now we know better



**STANLEY PRUSINER:**  
Even his Nobel hasn't erased doubt about his theory that proteins called prions cause disease

PHOTOS: TOP: BROWN; MIDDLE: THE GRANVILLE COLLECTION; THOMAS BIRCHING FOR TIME