

Project Alpha

The Project Alpha Experiment: Part 1. The First Two Years

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What would happen if two young Conjurers posing as psychics were introduced into a well-funded university parapsychology laboratory?

Generous funding doesn't make scientists smart . . . Nor are they able to detect trickery without help.

James Randi

When it was announced in 1979 that noted engineer James S. McDonnell, board chairman of McDonnell-Douglas Aircraft and devotee of the paranormal, had awarded a \$500,000 grant to Washington University in St. Louis, Missouri, for the establishment of the McDonnell Laboratory for Psychical Research, it seemed a the ideal opportunity to initiate an experiment I had contemplated for some time. It was designed to test two major hypotheses.

Parapsychologists have been lamenting for decades that they are unable to conduct proper research due to the lack of adequate funding, but I felt strongly that the problem lay in their strong pro-psychic bias. The first hypothesis, therefore, was that no amount of financial support would remove that impediment to improvement in the quality of their work. Moreover, I have always been in accord with many others in the field – such as Stanley Krippner, current president of the Para psychological Association – who insisted that qualified, experienced conjurers were essential for design, implementation, and evaluation of experiments in parapsychology, especially where deception – involuntary or deliberate – by subjects or experimenters, might be possible. So the second hypothesis was that parapsychologists would resist the accepting expert conjuring assistance in designing proper control procedures and, as a result, would fail to detect various kinds of simple magic tricks.

U.K. Parapsychologist Trevor Finch had even directly suggested that skeptics try to introduce a conjuror into a lab disguised as a psychic.



Certainly my plan seemed to be in accordance with the expressed needs of the Parapsychological community.

The director of the McDonnell Lab was physics professor Peter R. Phillips, who had a decade of interest in parapsychology behind him. He had declared in the press that the lab intended to investigate psychokinetic metal bending (PKMB) by children. Accordingly, I asked two young conjurers who had been in touch with me by mail, and had expressed an interest in my work as a skeptic, to write the McDonnell lab claiming psychic powers. Our experiment was to be code-named "Project Alpha."

We learned that the lab had considered some 300 applicants who contacted them in response to notices in the media. Both my colleagues Steve "Banachek" Shaw (herein referred to as his stage name Banachek), an English immigrant hospital employee in Washington, PA, and part time mentalist, and Michael Edwards, a student in Marion Iowa, and well-known there as a magician, were the only McDonnell lab subjects chosen from that rather large group of applicants. They were 18 and 17 years old, respectively when they began the project.

We had established well in advance of the beginning of Project Alpha that at a suitable date we would reveal the deception. Also, the subjects agreed that, if they were ever asked directly by an experimenter if they were using tricks, they would immediately answer, "Yes, and we were sent here by James Randi." They would then answer any and all questions concerning their involvement.

Even before the boys were tested at the lab, I sent Phillips a list of eleven "Caveats" concerning tests done with human subjects. For example, I warned him not to allow the subjects to run the experiments by changing the protocol. Similarly, I suggested capricious demands by subjects might well be the means of introducing conditions that would permit subterfuge. He was warned that reports of conditions should be very precise, assuming nothing. Above all, I urged that a conjuror be present. To that end, I offered to attend the McDonnell lab tests at my own expense, without any requirements that I be credited with any participation, or even attendance, in subsequent reports.

From the very beginning, the researchers ignored the rules I had suggested. As in other investigations, the "gifted subjects" took over running the experiments. They threw minor tantrums (inspired by similar events reported to have taken place at the Stanford Research Institute when Uri Geller was examined there in the 1970's) whenever conditions were not to their liking.

Though I had specifically warned Phillips against allowing more than one test object (spoon or key, for example) to be placed before a subject during tests, the lab table was habitually littered with objects. The specimens were not permanently marked, but instead bore paper tags attached with string loops. Banachek and Edwards found it easy to switch tags after the objects had been accurately measured, thus producing the illusion that an object handled in the most casual fashion had undergone a deformation.

During one type of telepathy test, a subject would be given a sealed envelope containing a picture drawn from a target pool. Left alone with the envelope, the subject would subsequently surrender the envelope to the experimenter, who would examine it for signs of tampering. The subject would then announce his selection for the target pool. This series of tests was quite successful – though not overly so, because the boys realized that 100 percent might be suggestive of trickery. They purposely minimized their success. The method was easy. Since the envelope was “sealed” only with a few staples, they removed them, peeked, and then replaced the staples through the original holes! In one case, Michael lost two staples, and to cover this he opted to open the envelope himself upon confronting the experimenter. The breach of protocol was accepted. The subject had been allowed to shape the experiment.

In other ESP tests, significant results were obtained only when one of the subjects was aware of the target drawing and was allowed to watch a TV monitor while the other tried to duplicate the drawing. The laboratory investigators decided, in their official report on the tests, that communication between the two by any means other than telepathy had been ruled out, since “though it might seem suspicious that the most significant scores were obtained under just that condition which might have permitted collusion . . . we feel that any hypothesis of normal communication is very unlikely: even the best of our hits are not consistent with verbal cueing, but rather exhibit consistent resemblances of form without any semantic relation.”

What the experimenters could have been told, if they had been willing to listen, was that the best of conjurors’ “mind-reading” tricks are accomplished by a “hot-and-cold” system of communication having nothing to do with actual verbalization. Results obtained therefore appear much more striking in nature, and seem to be what might have been achieved as a result of a “telepathic” transference. No amount of acting can simulate the actual difficulty experienced by the operators of such a system.

Though no communication took place during these tests, the lack of “consistent” hits referred to in the quote above would have provided just the required conditions for acceptance, had the experiment been successful. As it was, another common conjuror’s ploy was utilized; giving an edge to the results that caused some excitement among the scientists. That “edge” would be eliminated, however, by proper double blind evaluation of the data.

One rather naïve experiment, conducted with Banachek, involved a small slab of clear acrylic plastic in which a shallow groove had been cut. Into this groove was placed a thin (about 1/16”) metal rod a few inches long that fit loosely, flush with the surface. It was believed, and so stated that it was not possible to remove the rod from the groove by hand without either overturning the slab or using a tool of some sort. Banachek was asked to stroke the metal with his finger and cause it to bend. He quickly discovered that the rod tilted up and out of the groove when he pressed down on one end, the flesh of his finger having squeezed into the groove. He simply removed the rod

unnoticed, bent it slightly, and re-inserted it into the groove, lying it on its side, since the groove was wide enough to accommodate the bend. Then he stroked and rotated the rod 90 degrees to make it appear to bend up and out of the groove. The feat was deemed impossible by trickery.

In another run of experiments, involving an electronic setup, the boys were asked to shorten the capacity of tubular electric fuses. A current would be passed through a fuse and gradually increased until the fuse blew out, and that value would be recorded. They obtained excellent results in this test, seeming to cause premature rupture of the fuses through mental influence. The reason for their success was simply that they were allowed to handle the fuses freely. They were able to re-insert the same blown fuse repeatedly! The circuit had been designed so that if a fuse were “open” – already blown – the instruments did not reveal the open circuit until the current was somewhat advanced. Thus it seemed that the fuse had blown quite prematurely. Also, the boys found that by pressing down upon one end of the fuse in its holder, or merely by touching it briefly while passing a hand over it, the instruments recorded unusual results that were interpreted by the experimenters as marvelous PSI effects.

Banachek suggested that he might be able to affect a video camera and while seated before one, staring into the lens, he gestured mysteriously over the instrument. The picture twice suddenly “bloomed” brightly, the image swelling and subsiding. This was recorded and subsequently shown in the official McDonnell lab film. It seemed to the researchers that this event was not possible by any but paranormal means: yet Banachek had simply reached forward and turned the “target” control on the side of the camera – twice – unseen by the lab personnel.

The McDonnell Lab videotape showed the subjects causing a light-weight paper rotor perched atop a needle-point to turn – in either direction, at their will – while mounted inside what was called a “bell jar.” The terminology was misleading indeed. A bell jar is a piece of laboratory equipment designed to be hermetically sealed to a base-plate, and usually capable of being evacuated of air. The actual item used was a glass dome, the cover of a cheap clock, placed upon a wooden base with a slot to receive the edge of the dome. A layer of aluminum foil that settled in the recess made a further seal.

The boys demonstrated that a static-charged comb was not able to cause a deflection of the rotor because of a special anti-static coating sprayed upon the dome. But when they replaced the dome, it was an easy matter to drop a small ball of aluminum foil into the slot, causing the dome to tilt slightly and provide a gap. By simply blowing surreptitiously at the base of the dome, the boys could cause air to circulate within and thus turn the balanced rotor. Changing body position and blowing from a different angle changed the direction of air movement, and thus the direction of rotor movement. Since the small ball of foil matched the layer of foil, it was invisible and could easily be removed after the experiment – especially since the boys were allowed to handle everything freely.

One device developed at the laboratory for testing the Alpha subjects consisted of an overturned aquarium bolted and padlocked to a stout table. Objects would be put inside and left overnight. Since the locks on the doors were of excellent quality, and Phillips wore the padlock and door keys around his neck, security was thought to be absolute. It was not. Banachek and Edwards simply left a window

unlocked, and returned to the premises at night. There were several way to open the sealed aquarium, and they were free to do anything they pleased with the contents, which were discovered in the morning by lab personnel to have been bent, twisted, broken, and moved about by mysterious paranormal forces.

A part of the aquarium test used a shallow box in which dry coffee-grounds were spread in a thin layer. Small cubes and other objects were placed therein, and were found to have spelled out strange cabalistic symbols when examined in the morning. This evoked much wonder among the investigators.

Later in the progress of Project Alpha, the amateur magician who originated the sealed-aquarium system, and who even now proclaims himself of being flimflammed in his specialty of designing un-tamperable sealed containers, tried to improve upon the aquarium by providing inviolable bottles. As we shall see, he failed even more spectacularly.

There is no question that the lab personnel believed that the boys were psychic. They did. It was this belief that made the deception exceedingly easy, and it was clear that, had the two entered the arena as conjurers, they could never have gotten away with all they did. The lab personnel further crippled themselves by referring to the kids as “gifted subjects,” even inventing the term Psychokinete to apply to them. Simple tricks, performed under very informal conditions of control, were declared PK events, and careless descriptions of circumstances surrounding the performances were written up. These factors certainly added to the sympathetic atmosphere in which the subjects were operating.

Another factor that led researchers down the garden path was their total, unquestioning acceptance of, and the belief in, the work of their fellows in the field. Even the most doubtful results, seriously questioned and in some cases thoroughly denounced by colleagues, were embraced by the investigators when it matched their needs. It is apparent that many Para psychological investigators never do house-cleaning to get rid of the obvious trash, and the clutter that results makes it impossible to obtain a clear picture of just what the their problem is.

Any minor remark of claim made by the subjects that seemed to fit an outside researcher’s notion of reality or fulfilled some expectation was further evidence to the laboratory investigators that they were dealing with the real thing. For example, Banachek and Mike complained about electronic equipment putting out “bad vibes,” not only to satisfy this established bit of mythology, but also to minimize proper video observation. Also, they were careful to mention that in early childhood both had experienced electric shocks, after which they had become aware of their psychic powers. Though not useable as strict evidence, acceptance of these tidbits further deepened the quicksand into which the researchers continued to sink.

All through the three-year period that Banachek and Mike were at the McDonnell lab, I continued to write Professor Phillips offering to attend experimental sessions as a consultant. Phillips seemed quite confident that he could not be deceived, however, and did not accept my offer.

Then, in July of 1981, I “leaked” broad hints of Project Alpha at a magician’s conference in Pittsburgh. Eleven days later, I heard that some rumors had reached the McDonnell lab. This had been done in an attempt to alert the parapsychologists. Instead, the rumors were reported to Banachek and Mike at the lab as great jokes. They had not asked if there was any truth to them.

Just previous to this event, Phillips had for the first time actually written to me for assistance. He asked if I would be prepared to supply him with a videotape of fake PKMB being performed, along with a revelation of how it had been done. He intended to show it at the forthcoming August meeting of the Para psychological Association in Syracuse. I immediately agreed to do so, and within a few days and I had excerpted a number of performances from my videotape library in which I was shown bending and breaking keys and spoons as well as doing some convincing “ESP” tricks. I supplied two sound tracks, one the original and another a running commentary describing in detail the method I used. I threw in , for educational purposes, an episode with Uri Geller in which he is seen to use exactly the same method of Spoon-bending performance, and is caught on tape doing so.

I felt that rumors of Alpha would reach Phillips at about the same time he had my videotape and that he would be able to examine both his evidence and mine in light of the possibility that the collusion rumor was true.

In return for my participation, I asked Phillips if I might have a copy of the McDonnell lab videotape of the Alpha subjects that had been prepared for showing along with my tape at the upcoming PA meeting. He agreed to do so: and, just days before the convention, I received his tape. I drew up a detailed analysis of the tricks shown there, pointing out that positively unmistakable evidence of deception was contained on their tape.

At the convention, Phillips showed my tape and his own. An active rumor began circulating that Phillips and I were working together to discredit the PA, and it was widely believed. It was no surprise that the parapsychologists with little enthusiasm received his announced findings – though some of them, Walter Uphoff and William Cox in particular, were ecstatic. Cox, never one to entertain any doubts, had written Phillips a month earlier objecting strenuously to his intention of showing the videotape I had prepared.. He apparently felt that it would not be good to introduce any doubts whatsoever into the proceedings.

A formal report on the two subjects, prepared by the McDonnell lab and distributed at the convention, was hastily recalled, and modifiers (“apparently,” “seemingly,” and “ostensibly”) were inserted at the appropriate points in the text. It was reprinted and once again distributed. In somewhat a state of shock, Phillips was cornered by me after the workshop, and I insisted upon showing him and Mark Shafer, his principal researcher, where the tape showed evidence of fraud. Visibly shaken, the two thanked me for my efforts, and I parted from them reasonably sure that they had been impressed enough to change their ways.

Upon my return from the convention, I contacted Banachek and Edwards, and informed them that Phillips was now very suspicious, and that Project Alpha was probably about to end.

Project Alpha

The Project Alpha Experiment: Part 2. Beyond the Laboratory

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Some scientists learn from their errors, others refuse to. The press makes wild claims, a professed 'expert' fails the test, and the hoax is disclosed.

James Randi

Upon returning to the McDonnell Lab, Alpha subjects Banachek and Edwards discovered that there had been big changes in the protocol. They called me in great excitement and announced that conditions were now such that they were unable to use simple trickery. In the fuse test, for example, they were no longer permitted to handle the test objects. In fact, there was now a cover over the fuse-holder, so manipulation had become impossible. Each fuse was marked with a distinctively colored lacquer and, when they tried to locate the source of that lacquer, they found it had been locked up. As they described the changed conditions to me, I realized that Peter Phillips had initiated exactly the precautions I had suggested to him at our meeting in Syracuse.

I had suggested, for example, that the marking of the items should be done on both a micro- and a macro-scale. This was the system designed to be used when Chris Evans, David Davies, and I tested "psychic" Jean-Pierre Girard in France for Nature Magazine. The cylindrical metal bars used on that occasion were boldly marked with colored stripes running the length of each bar, applied

with indelible felt-tip markers. Thus no substitution of bars was possible, and rotation along the major axis to reveal a previously attend bend – the means by which Girard usually accomplished his trick – would be immediately visible. Final identification of the examples was made by means of very tiny scratch marks made under high magnification, much like fingerprints. Girard completely failed this careful set of tests.

Upon hearing this report, I was elated, as were the boys. The McDonnell Lab personnel had listened to advice, and reformed accordingly. The fuse test was not the only thing that had been revamped. A totally different attitude prevailed at the Lab. The boys felt that from then on they would have a difficult time getting around the protocol. But parapsychologists outside the McDonnell Lab were eager to involve the boys in PSI-testing, and we were willing to accommodate them.



Actually, Banachek and Edwards had been visiting other investigators for some time while still involved at the MacDonnell lab. Two of them, Dr. Berthold Schwarz and Professor Walter Uphoff, are known to maintain high profiles in the media espousing any and all psychic wonders. Both were quoted rhapsodizing about Banachek and Edwards in the National Enquirer, while much more sober statements were given by the McDonnell Lab. When being interviewed by the Enquirer Edwards asked the reporter if he was really sure about the phenomenon he was writing about. Said the reporter: “Mike, I don’t have to believe it. All I need is two professors to tell me it’s true and I have a story!”

Schwarz produced a 51 page paper for the Journal of the American Society of Psychosomatic Dentistry and Medicine titled “Taming the Poltergeist,” in which he reported on experiments conducted by him at his home and at the National Institute For Rehabilitation Engineering (NIRE) in Butler, New Jersey, using Banachek as the subject. Actually, the experimenter was Banachek; Schwarz was the subject.

There was dozens of “experiments” described, laced with psychiatric observations attempting to explain why events occurred the way they did. Every creak, pop, movement, and unexpected event that took place – even after Banachek had left the scene – was attributed to his magical influences. And amid all this, Schwarz kept encouraging Banachek to use his powers to heal the sick – especially a close relative of Schwarz. Banachek tried every thing he could think of to talk that person out of dependence on magic, but to no avail.

At one point, Banachek was given an 8-mm motion picture camera and was asked to shoot some film of Donald Selwyn, the director of NIRE. When it was developed, a strange amorphous “swirl” was found in the center of some of the frames, and psychiatrist Schwarz discovered in that swirl: some moving faces, a Jesus portrait, a UFO, a woman’s torso, nipple, breast and thigh, and even a baby being born! “The swirl,” reported Schwarz, “followed Selwyn around the parking lot.” Though no one there was able to figure out how these shapes had gotten on the film other than through paranormal means, Banachek explained to me that he’d simply spat on the lens!

It is interesting to quote from that study of Schwarz. Writing of those who would deny the validity of what he was describing and calling for dependable observers of these wonders, he said, “. . .it would be desirable to have sophisticated conjurors and gentleman . . . like W. E. Cox, [who] in addition to being a highly trained engineer is also a leading parapsychologist and expert conjuror. Consulting conjurors whose probity, ethics, and claims about themselves have not been verified and have seemingly sought publicity with poorly documented sensational charges and challenges should be avoided.” I disagree with that first statement, but agree with the second; if Schwarz can produce such a person for me, I will personally tar and feather the scoundrel.

Both Uphoff and Schwarz depended upon William E. Cox, an amateur magician and enthusiastic psi devotee, for design of their security systems. Cox appeared at both the Syracuse ('81) and Cambridge ('82) Para psychological Association conventions and showed his now-famous “SORRAT” (Society for Research in Rapport and Telekinesis) films in which a deck of “sealed” ESP cards is seen to emerge from it’s box, shuffle and sort itself, dance about, and return to the box. The whole farce took place inside a “sealed” aquarium (like the one used in the McDonnell Lab tests) that Cox designed and built. At both conventions, most of the parapsychologists were convulsed with laughter upon seeing Cox’s circus. One shouted, “Where’s George Pal?” - reference to the old “Puppetoon” animated films of a few years ago. It seems there is a point beyond which even dedicated para-scientists cannot maintain belief.

John Thomas Richards, PH.D., is the man behind SORRAT. While visiting in Phillips’s Lab along with the Alpha subjects, Richards had levitated a small, light, folding table – and photographs were taken. One of the photos revealed a very prominent thumb (attached to Richards) under the edge of the table, a fact that was called to the attention of the lab personnel by the Alpha boys. The researchers mumbled a bit, but said nothing more about it. Richards is fond of producing “spirit raps” with his foot, and the Alpha boys found it a hilarious sight as learned people stared at the floor whereon Richards stood, their mouths agape, while thumps came from a clearly moving foot. On another occasion, a video-tape record shows Richards and his wife as they approached a spoon on the lab table, blocked it with their bodies, and walked away again. The spoon was seen to have developed a paranormal bend while shielded from view.

(On March 22, 1982, Phillips sent out a notice disclaiming any validation by the McDonnell Lab of events that took place there involving Richards. The SORRAT book clearly implies support of the McDonnell Lab for “miracles” that occurred within the “sealed” bottles Richards supplied the Alpha boys to work with. He claimed that pipe-cleaners twisted themselves into human figures while Banachek merely stated at them from across the room. Needless to say, Banachek understands quite well just how the twisting took place. The “mini-labs” (bottles) designed and prepared by William E. Cox and declared by him to be foolproof were easily opened and re-closed.)

While being tested by another believer, Professor Otto H. Schmitt of the University of Minnesota, the boys had inspiration. Schmitt had supplied them with a few tiny, cheap digital watches – the type that are permanently sealed. He’d asked them to alter them paranormally. Edwards snuck one out of the lab and, while having lunch in a self-service restaurant during a noon break in the tests, he placed it inside his sandwich and stuck it in the microwave oven. As expected, the watch went crazy, displaying gibberish on its liquid-crystal readout. Professor Schmitt considered this to be a wonderful example of psychic force and marveled over it to the press.

Preceding the psychic picnic at Madison, Wisconsin, held by Walter Uphoff in the guise of a serious seminar, I received an inquiry from Tony Edwards, a producer for the BBC Science Features Department in London. He intended to conduct on-camera tests of psychokinetic metal-bending (PKMB) during the seminar and wanted me to design a proper protocol for him to use. I did so, and supplied a set of sealed acrylic tubes containing metal targets for the metal-benders to attempt to distort. The subjects were to be Banachek, Mike Edwards, and Masuaki Kiyota, a highly-touted spoon-twister from Japan who was the major subject of Uphoff’s ludicrous book *Mind Over Matter* (one of three books of that exact title in recent years!) and whose unpsychic talents were exposed by Christopher Scott and Michael Hutchinson (SI, Spring 1979). They were to be filmed at the Channel 21 PBS station in Madison. And I did not inform my two colleagues how I had designed the tests; they had to do the best they could.

Producer Edwards followed my protocol exactly, and the results were predictable. So long as the proper controls were maintained, zero mental-bending took place. None of the prepared samples changed shape, and Uphoff derided Tony’s attitude. He complained that the atmosphere was “oppressive” and that psychic events could not possibly take place when conditions were so closely controlled. However, the BBC team was determined to obtain PKMB under the strictly scientific conditions and was not persuaded by Uphoff to relax controls. When the tests were terminated, metal contorted left and right as I predicted it would. (Gerard, in France, had put in a measurable bend the very moment the experiment was officially ended, and video coverage terminated.) This only served to frustrate Tony, who had begun the project convinced not only that PKMB was a reality but that he could capture the beast on film.

Uri Geller, the former psychic superstar, was scheduled to appear at that Madison meeting and I wanted to see if he had any new wrinkles in his act. It had been a few years since I’d actually seen him in person, and even then I was usually tucked behind the scenes in a studio, watching a TV monitor in a control room or at the sides of a darkened lecture hall, since Geller has always refused to perform when I am present. I determined to attend his performance in Madison, and to watch my two colleagues, who were also booked to appear there with Kiyota.

I sent off my check to Uphoff to register for the meeting. I never saw it again, nor did I receive any acknowledgment. But what I did get was a windy letter from his lawyer forbidding me from corresponding in any way with Uphoff, ever! Now such an injunction is certainly unenforceable – and very presumptuous. But I replied that Uphoff would never again hear from me in any way. I have kept that promise: Professor Uphoff has the right not to be informed.

But Uphoff did hear from an Adam Jersin of New Brunswick, New Jersey (not far from where I live!), who sent a postal money order to register for the meeting. He was accepted, and soon after that a man with a dyed beard, wearing dark contact-lenses, a reddish fright-wig, dreadful auxiliary dentures, a belly pad, elevated cowboy boots, and a \$7.00 suit from the Salvation Army store arrived among the strange assemblage at Madison in the company of a Moses Figueroa – a Punjab-like-companion – and they blended right in.

Uphoff could have rearranged the letters of the name and come up with a different one, but the anagram got right by him. He not only greeted Jersin and autographed a book for him, but he continually directed him to various functions, since Adam seemed even more disoriented than the average person at the affair. I must admit that I lost a pound or two during those three days, since the protruding dentures made chewing impossible. I spent most of my mealtimes admiring miraculous anecdotes delivered by my table-companions.

I rose early each day at Madison, so as to be assembled in my finery in time to take advantage of the Myriad of wonders offered – all of which was to be culminated with the appearance of Geller himself. But small dramas were played out before that glorious event. During breakfast one morning, I chanced to sit beside my two young colleagues, who were dazzling Tony Edwards's secretary, a lady named Dee. She squealed in delight as each spoon bent and moved about, and managed to castigate that dreadful man Randi whenever the boys (not by accident, I'm sure) brought up my name.

During one spoon-bending session on stage featuring the boys and Masuaki Kiyota, I stood beside an ebullient Teuton who exclaimed, as he watched Michael Edwards stroking a slowly bending spoon, "Dis is de REAL ting! Oh, how I vish dat Randi Vas here – he vould not believe it! He vould laugh at dis!" "Really?" I replied – and laughed. I dared not catch Michael's eye, or we'd have broken up that session in a hurry.

During those few days, in addition to their previous encounters with Kiyota, the boys had ample opportunity to witness his methods. Stocky, with short, strong fingers, the Japanese wonder has developed a method of putting a twist in the neck of a spoon that seems beyond the capability of an ordinary person using only his bare hands. Kiyota is known to have sat with an already-twisted spoon for long periods of time, massaging it and finally allowing the twist to come into view.

Finally it was time for the Geller show. Each person was carefully scrutinized at the door (and checked against known undesirables), and after gushing introductions the spoon bender appeared, boyishly effervescent as always. He told the usual endless anecdotes about his childhood, innocence, validity, and indignation at doubters. The audience was enthralled, and I managed to applaud each and every remark, seated as I was in the front row immediately under Geller's nose.

The amateur benders, Banachek, Edwards, and Kiyota, were seated on stage with Geller, who mildly acknowledged them and then dismissed them so the really good stuff could begin. As he brazenly performed his obvious routines I avoided glances that the boys directed at me, shocked as they were at the blatant methods he used. He had lost, so it seemed, much of the smoothness he once had.

I will not go into details of how he performed except to say it that it was quite standard and expected. Nothing new appeared, except that he made more excuses and denials than he might have previously. As he finished, I rushed onstage to have him autograph a copy of his book, which I now treasure as a trophy of that occasion. The World's Greatest Psychic never knew whose hand he shook.

Just about that time, I became aware that Berthold Schwarz and a UFO-devotee from New Jersey were looking at me strangely. In the parlance of the trade, I knew that they'd "twigged" me. With a quick word to Moses, who then ran interference for me, I left the area and headed for the hotel, where I doffed the disguise in the room.

Meanwhile, pandemonium ruled in the lobby. Moses stated around to hear the scuttlebutt and reported that the consternation was intense. No one was really sure I was there, but they acted as if Martin Luther had been seen at the Vatican. Later, Uphoff was to hint that he'd known the truth all along, and I'd fooled no one. And Pigs have wings.

Immediately following the Madison Meeting, Banachek and Edwards took off for England. There they were interviewed by that epitome of careful research and reporting, London's Psychic News, which was bowled over. Miracles flew from their fingertips, and the paper gushed over their abilities – much as it had touted my own tricks as genuine when I'd visited its offices years ago and hoodwinked the staff in the guise of a psychic.

In their hotel in London, where I joined them while filming, the Alpha boys showed me a small transparent plastic box containing paperclips. It had been given to them by the McDonnell lab, having been made up by a then unnamed parapsychologist who turned out to be George Hansen of the Institute for parapsychology, in Durham, North Carolina. The object of this device was to see if Banachek and Edwards could bend the paperclips without opening the box. It occurred to me that here was a quality about paperclips that might serve us well. I stepped to the window for a moment and then returned the box to them with the clips linked together.

It had been rather simple. Anyone who works with these devices know that they frequently become linked by accident. By jogging them about until one "nested" within the other, then rapping the box against my hand to throw them against the end of the box, I'd gotten them to link. I told the boys to return the still-sealed box and await results. Though the intent of the experiment had been different from the result we obtained, Hansen described it as "quite impressive!" He has since said he solved the mystery himself without having to invoke psychic powers.

Back in America, Banachek and Edwards were presented with a new challenge: linking rectangular plywood rings. William Cox had

made a set of three rings and left them with Richards, who then “discovered” they had become mysteriously linked together while in his possession. Though such a trick is quite simple, it was looked upon as evidence of irrefutable psychic power at work – even though the rings, unlike those I produced for the boys to use, showed sizable cracks that rather gave them away. Psychic News challenged me to pay my prize of \$10,000, not knowing that I was daily linking particle board and plywood rings just for practice. Banachek set off to Walter Uphoff, who had remarked on this sort of miracle, “Here’s something I’d like to see a conjuror do!” Anything to oblige, Walter.

Just as the excitement over the linked rings was building, it came time to tip Project Alpha for good. The McDonnell researchers had essentially recovered themselves by reversing rather positive convictions they’d previously held, though personally and emotionally the personnel were still convinced of the validity of what they’d seen. As for the researchers outside the McDonnell Lab, there had been little hope that they would ever change their point of view, in spite of the evidence. Some people have been educated far beyond their intelligence.

As an example of just how strongly some self-appointed parapsychologists can rationalize their failures, Walter Uphoff – desperately trying to explain his fumbling following the exposure of Project Alpha in Discover magazine – stated that Banachek and Mike really had psychic powers all along but were now lying in claiming that they had tricked him! To further display his confusion, he asked a reporter, “How do these kids know they’re fakes?” The mind boggles.

Perhaps Berthold Schwarz expressed his misunderstanding of the whole affair best when he declared, “Randi has set parapsychology back 100 years!” Not so, Doctor. Banachek, Mike and I brought parapsychology into the 1980’s – and if it cannot stand that atmosphere it must perish. The kind of work that validated the powers of the Alpha kids belongs in the dark Ages, along with other Things That Go Bump in The Night. It is claptrap and deserves to be labeled as such.

If Project Alpha resulted in Parapsychologists (real parapsychologists!) awakening to the fact that they are able to be deceived, either by subjects or themselves, as a result of their convictions and their lack of expertise in the arts of deception, then it has served its purpose. Those who fell into the trap invited that fate; those who pulled back from the brink deserve our applause.

From within the Parapsychological community itself came enough positive, supportive comment to encourage us to believe that Project Alpha had obtained its goal. It was described as, “splendid and deserved.” It was called, “an important sanitary service,” “commendable,” “long-needed,” and “worthwhile.” Said one scientist, “If I were you, I would have tried something like this long ago.” Researchers described their own work as “entirely too lax” and their controls as “not the tightest.”

As for Banachek and Michael Edwards, who spent more than 160 hours during the four years of their lives and cooperating in the experiment, I hope that my readers will join me in thanking them for their dedication and perseverance. As one of them said, “It had to be done.