

The Final Word

by: York W. Porter, Immortalist Society President

A Crackpot is a Crackpot Until....

Back in the 1950's, when I was a young boy, I grew up in the middle of the Appalachian mountain chain of the western part of Virginia. Like the surrounding mountainous areas of Kentucky and West Virginia, the primary industry of the region was, and remains, coal mining. One of the more or less constant sights through my youth was the number of trains laden with coal leaving the region for distant industrial centers. As a boy, I was always fascinated with these trains, only imagining their destinations and thinking about what seemed to me to be the "exotic" places that they were headed towards. This early interest in railroads has stuck with me to this day and I have read, down through the years, about the old time steam locomotives, the modern day Diesel-Electrics, the Japanese bullet trains, the TGV high speed rail that operates in Europe and just about anything else I could find on the subject of railroading. Recently, while browsing the Internet, I came across information about a man who worked extensively in his life in developing the technology of magnetic levitation for trains. For those who may not be familiar, magnetic levitation is basically using two electromagnets, with one in the track and one in the train car itself, with the same magnetic poles to raise ("levitate") the train a small amount above the specialized track that is used for this. This makes the train have, to some degree, the properties of an "air hockey" puck, where the friction which normally occurs between the steel wheels and steel rails of a conventional train goes away, leaving only wind resistance as the force to be overcome by the trains propulsive power. Sir Eric Laithwaite was the man who worked so tirelessly on maglev trains. He was well recognized by the British scientific and technological community for his efforts in trying to make such trains a day in/day out reality. Well trained in electrical engineering and intelligent and imaginative to boot,

he was the sort of person one would expect would be listened to if he came up with a novel idea or new development. One day, he was contacted by a man who had come on an interesting and seemingly unexplainable phenomena. The man had taken a small gyroscope and attached it to the front of a four wheeled wagon. When the gyroscope was spun and the wagon released, the wagon began to move, in spite of the fact that there was no direct connection of gears or a transmission or a chain or any other device between the gyroscope and any of the four wheels. It seemed impossible according to Professor Laithwaite's knowledge of physics and even, to his way of thinking, violated one of Newton's laws of motion. Professor Laithwaite decided to take the problem to the Royal Institution for further discussion and demonstration. Rather than the interest of the community that held him in high regard and the vigorous scientific discussion that he expected to occur, he got skepticism and the belief that this was "some sort of trick". When he expressed his professional opinion that Newton's laws of motion were apparently not being followed by the demonstration, he was met with frosty silence. As Professor Laithwaite put it in a later recollection "I was very excited about it because I knew I had something to show them that was startling. And I did it in the spirit of 'come and see what I've discovered---come and share this with me.' It was only afterwards that I realized that no one wanted to share it with me. The reaction was 'the man's obviously a lunatic' ". For the next twenty years, Sir Eric pursued investigating the behavior of gyroscopes. Eventually, he was able to reconcile theory and experimental evidence and show that the unusual and, at the time, unexplainable phenomena was indeed consistent with Newton's laws. Not long before his death in 1997, Sir Eric talked about the long road that he had traveled pretty much alone in his quest to "explain the unexplainable". He is quoted as having said: "Why should people reject the idea of something new? Well, of course, they always have. If you go back to Galileo, they were going to put him to death for not saying the earth was the center of the universe. I'm reminded of something that

Mark Twain once said: 'A crank is a crank only until he's been proved correct.' "When I was a teenager growing up in that isolated area in Virginia, I came across a book that would change my viewpoint forever. The Prospect of Immortality, written by a man whom I never expected to meet and whom I am now privileged to call a friend, was an eye-opener for me. As I've stated before in other columns, when I got done reading it, I was both filled with a sense of excitement over being exposed to a world changing concept but also with a thought of "Why didn't I think of this myself?" Robert Ettinger's logic was, and is, so straightforward and "air-tight" that it seemed to me that the adult community and especially the scientists and technical people involved in it, would leap on the idea with great fervor. I "just knew" that before I was grown myself that the whole endeavor would be up and running with millions of patients in cryonic suspension. One thing that I didn't "just know", however, is how that the adults, now including yours truly, all have their "blind spots" and that many times, it is more a matter of sociology, the "pecking order" and "office politics" than pure science as to which ideas come to the forefront. As one humorist put it, "Science progresses, funeral by funeral". Cryonics itself has progressed mightily since the 1960's with many people, including scientists, medical doctors, and engineers, having reached the same conclusion I did about its validity. For many others in those same professions, however, the whole thing is, regrettably, looked on as a "crackpot" idea, especially among those who haven't taken the time to read and/or study anything about it. Sadly, this method of thinking occurs often by those who should know better. For those folks, I am reminded of Arthur C. Clarke's three phases of a new technology. One, "It'll never work", Two, "OK, maybe it will work but....." Three, "You know, I thought it was a good idea all along!!" Can't wait until the same folks saying it is a crackpot idea and that Professor Ettinger is a crackpot for having thought it up, will be saying that "...I thought it was a good idea..." line with all the fervor that many of the rest of us are able to say it now.

(Parts of this article can be attributed to a web page
“The Royal Institution is Not Amused”).