

James Randi Educational Foundation

an educational resource on the paranormal, pseudoscientific and the supernatural



Library

The Matter of Dowsing

from *Swift*, Vol. 2, No. 3/4 January, 1999

By far the most common claim made for the Million Dollar Challenge offered by the James Randi Educational Foundation (JREF) is dowsing.

Dowsing is as strictly defined the claimed ability to discover underground sources of water or metals by means of a "dowsing rod." Another term used is "divining." However, this terminology and its scope have been expanded and is now used with a far greater range of meanings. Dowsing now includes the claimed ability to discover almost *anything*, from water and minerals to missing children and archaeological sites. Each dowser will have his or her specialty. The device any dowser will use ranges from the traditional forked stick to just the bare hand. Pendulums, bent wires, wands of various sorts, and swiveled rods and housings are commonly encountered. In every case, the device used is a system in a state of unstable equilibrium, something that cannot easily be kept in a steady condition, and which is subject to very slight tremors, twitches, or changes of inclination. We've seen an astonishing variety of metal springs, coils, wires, balls, threads and bobbing elastic devices, all trembling and vibrating freely, used as dowsing machinery.

- [Little Agreement](#)
- [A Wide Spectrum of Claims](#)
- [The Ideomotor Effect](#)
- [A Compelling Belief](#)
- [Excuses, Excuses](#)

Currently, several "scientific" versions of dowsing rods which purportedly contain actual electronic circuitry, are being sold to government agencies in the USA for very high prices, as much as \$14,000. One such stick, known as the "DKL LifeGuard," is endorsed and validated by scientists who certainly should know better.

Little Agreement

Dowsers seldom agree on the basics of their claims. Some will insist that rubber footwear or footwear made of other insulating materials *must* be used by the operator, while an equal number insist that such materials inhibit the effect, and must *never* be used. Those who use stiff wires bent at right angles and held in each hand parallel to the ground, may say that the wires will cross

<http://www.randi.org/library/dowsing/>

Library, The Matter of Dowsing

one another when the sought-after object or substance is encountered; just as many say that the wires will diverge. Every dowser has his or her own personal theory, rules and preferred techniques.

Some claim that their power is divine in nature. Some say that dowsing is a learned art. Most claim that *anyone* can dowse successfully, while others say that it is an inherited gift. Some deny that it is in any way "paranormal," while some embrace that definition. Dowsers will often scoff at the claims of other dowsers, and will have a very limited set of parameters that they will accept as viable. Some say that they can only perform successfully if there is a real "human need" present; others are not so inhibited. Many say that they can find *any* object or substance, while others say they can find, for example, only flowing water moving underground, but not in pipes. Some are specifically pipe-locators, they say, and some only look for metal pipes, not plastic.

Most dowsers claim 100% accuracy. Very few claim anything less than 90%.

A Wide Spectrum of Claims

Water dowsers are by far the most common variety we have encountered, and they, too, exhibit a wide spectrum of claims. Some only look for fresh/potable water. With some, it must be moving water. Some cannot detect water in pipes, only "natural" water. Most say they can tell how far down the water is, and at what rate it will be delivered, once tapped. Water dowsers as well as some less specialized say they can be thrown off by magnetic fields, nearby electricity, machinery, buried meteorites, masses of metal, or other underground rivers that intersect their path. The list of elements and situations that they say can inhibit their performances is endless.

The bottom line is that they *all* fail, when properly and fairly tested. There are no exceptions. Even after they have clearly and definitely failed, they *always* continue to believe in their powers. Why should this be so?

The Ideomotor Effect

We are witnessing here a very powerful psychological phenomenon known as the "ideomotor effect." This is defined as, "an involuntary body movement evoked by an idea or thought process rather than by sensory stimulation." The dowser is unknowingly moving the device of choice, exerting a small shaking, tilt or pressure to it, enough to disturb its state of balance. This has been shown any number of times to be true, but the demonstration has meant nothing to the dowsers, who will persist in their delusion no matter how many times it is shown to them that dowsing does *not* work. The defensive reaction of most dowsers, following their failure, is to claim that they should not have submitted to any test, and will never do so again. And most will say that dowsing comes under special rules that deny that it can be tested, ever. The discouraging fact is that no dowser is *ever* convinced, as a result of proper double-blind testing, that they cannot dowse. Their need to believe is so strong and so ingrained, that they will refuse to accept any quality and/or quantity of good evidence. They have adopted a philosophy that shields them against reality.

There appears to be a feeling on the part of the dowsers that if they've been self-deceived, it indicates that they are therefore stupid or naive. This is certainly not the case. Any person, regardless of education, IQ, sophistication, or social position, can fall for the ideomotor phenomenon. An indication of that is that a great number of scientists mostly physicists have embraced belief in dowsing, in spite of their superior knowledge of how the world works. But this is an effect of the mind, a different matter from the workings of the common everyday objects and situations we encounter in our lives.

<http://www.randi.org/library/dowsing/>

Million Dollar Challenge



One Million Dollars awaits the individual that can prove, in a controlled setting, that they have "super" powers. [Click here.](#)

JREF Store



As part of our fund raising efforts, the JREF is offering certain products related to our efforts. [Click here.](#)

Search



11/05/2009

Page 2 of 4

11/05/2009

A Compelling Belief

Please be aware of this, however: though you may be puzzled over this seemingly strange conviction embraced by the dowzers, unless you have actually *experienced* the ideomotor effect at work in yourselves, you cannot have a proper appreciation of how absolutely compelling and irresistible it can be and is. In fact, dowzers are insistent that the disbeliever should try the effect and thereby become convinced of its efficacy; they assure you that once you've tried it, you'll change your mind. And they're often right in that respect; the dowsing device really seems to move on its own, in response to some sort of external signal or force. As a result of some imagined or real hint from nature water dowzers are often familiar with the topological or geographical signs or conditions that indicate the probability of water in any given spot the operator unconsciously tilts or impels the device, and believes that it is indicating the presence of the sought-after material. That is simply not true. It's a trick of the mind, a *very* convincing trick, but a self-deception nonetheless.

Now, I am fully aware that the dowzers will read this discourse and will manage to completely ignore it. I regularly receive expressions of pity from them, for my inability to accept the reality that they have discovered. Many applications that are received at the James Randi Educational Foundation from dowzers will express great wonderment at why the million-dollar prize has not already been awarded, when dowsing is such an easy thing, they say, to demonstrate. Many are amazed that dowsing is eligible for the prize at all, since it is so widely accepted and believed in. And each dowser assures me that they are going to be the one to show me the error of my ways, and to dazzle me with a simple demonstration.

Excuses, Excuses

Each dowser goes away from any trial of their powers, dismayed by their failure, puzzled at the reasons for the failure, but *always* capable of coming up with a reasonable to them excuse. That excuse may be any one of many. It may be an unfortunate arrangement of the planets, improper temperature or humidity, a problem of indigestion, too much ambient noise or too much silence or a poor attitude on the part of the observers. These are not invented excuses; they are all drawn from my personal experience in testing these folks.

I must say that of all those who have ever tried to win the Pigasus Prize, and of those who I have otherwise tested in every part of the world, no claimants even approach the dowzers for honesty. These are persons who are genuinely, thoroughly, self-deceived. In only two instances one in Australia and the other in the U.K. did I ever encounter any cheating being tried by dowzers. And those cases were easily solved and immediately terminated.

I ask all those who wish to claim the prize based upon their dowsing skills to first try a double-blind test of their abilities. We at the JREF can advise you how to design such a test protocol. You will find, I assure you, that the description above of the ideomotor effect will be proven valid. And I know full well that you, as a dowser, will refuse this advice and believe that, for you, such a procedure is not necessary. I base this conclusion on my many years of handling dowsing claimants.

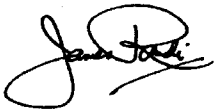
If you wish to see a full account of the most definite set of dowsing abilities ever conducted, you may find it in the first two issues of *Swift*, the newsletter of the JREF. Numbers 1 and 2 of volume 1 may be purchased for US\$6, postpaid, from the address on page 32. We sincerely recommend that you *read this account* before proceeding with your application.

<http://www.randi.org/library/dowsing/>

11/05/2009

Library, The Matter of Dowsing

Page 4 of 4



[Return to the library main page.](#)

[Home](#) | [Commentary](#) | [Lectures](#) | [\\$1 Million Paranormal Challenge](#) | [Swift](#) | [Library](#) | [Donations](#) | [Contact](#) | [Internet Audio Show](#)
[Join Now](#) | [Books & Videos for Sale](#) | [About the JREF](#) | [Randi's Calendar](#) | [Scholarships and Awards](#) | [Learning Resources](#) | [Press Center](#)

© 2001 James Randi Educational Foundation

Web Design and Maintenance provided by [Innovation Design, Inc.](#)