

# St. Petersburg Times

**Nothing to fear?** RICK GERSHMAN October 13, 2006

**Yes, it's that day, but go on, break a mirror, step on a crack, hug a masked man. You'll likely be just fine, the Tampa Bay Skeptics say.**

---

TAMPA

Today is Friday the 13th, which might have escaped your attention unless you're a movie executive opening a horror film.

But you also might have noticed if you happen to have paraskavedekatriaphobia.

That's the term - coined in recent years - for the fear of this particular, and supposedly unlucky, marriage of day and date.

It's pronounced pair-uh-skuh-VAY-duh-kuh-TRY-uh-FOE-bee-uh, if you really want to give it a shot.

Better yet, don't bother, says Terry Smiljanich, chairman of the Tampa Bay Skeptics.

Based in South Tampa, it's a nonprofit group dedicated to casting a hard, scientific light on all things that claim to be supernatural, paranormal or otherwise unexplainable by scientific evidence.

Take Friday the 13th, which Smiljanich pronounced smil-YAWN-ich, as if you didn't have enough to deal with already considers a silly thing to fear.

Sure, it could be bad news if you're a camp counselor at Camp Crystal Lake, the fictional slaying grounds of unstoppable killer Jason Voorhees in many of the Friday the 13th horror films.

But otherwise, you should be okay.

The days of the week were arbitrarily determined, as was the calendar, Smiljanich points out. There's no indication whatsoever that Friday the 13th is less lucky than any other day and date combination.

"John F. Kennedy was assassinated on Friday the 22nd," said Smiljanich, a lawyer who focuses on consumer protection law. "Korea tested its nuclear device on Monday the 9th."

As for Friday the 13th?

The occasional combination of day and date have proven unlucky for some. Psychologists have found that some people are likely to have accidents or get sick on Friday the 13th, though that has been attributed to such people feeling a heightened state of anxiety on that day.

Every year has at least one Friday the 13th; some have as many as three. Today is the second occurrence in 2006, after one in January. There will be two in 2007 (in April and July), one in 2008 (June) and three in 2009 (February, March, November).

And none of them, Smiljanich said, is any different than a Saturday the 4th, a Wednesday the 18th or a Thursday the 30th. Unless, of course, the Thursday the 30th was in February. That would be weird.

Tampa Bay Skeptics is in business to debunk claims of supernatural and other unexplainable forces. Gary Posner founded it in 1988 and serves as its executive director.

While membership fluctuates, Smiljanich said, the group generally has 70 to 100 questioning minds at work. They discuss reports of supposedly paranormal and similar issues during quarterly meetings.

"We're devoted to critical examination of paranormal and fringe science claims," he said. "We don't prejudge, but if you do claim (a paranormal ability), we do demand you prove it."

The Skeptics put their money where their dubious mouths are. Since 1989, the group has a standing \$1,000 challenge for "anyone able to provide ... verifiable scientific proof of any paranormal phenomenon."

Only a handful of people have tried over the years, and no one has yet succeeded. If anyone does, the Tampa group will arrange for a test by the James Randi Educational Foundation - a national assembly of Doubting Thomases - for its \$1,000,000 challenge. (No one has passed that one either.)

Smiljanich, 59, said a renewed focus on scientific reasoning is important in a culture where faith-based programs, the separation of church and state, and the teaching of creationism have prompted nationwide debate.

The Tampa Bay Skeptics does not have any religious or political agenda, Smiljanich said. Several members are Republicans and voted for President Bush, considered one of the most faith-oriented presidents in U.S. history.

"Believe whatever you want to believe," he said, "but when you claim your religion can turn lead into gold or whatever, when you're talking about the real world, we take issue."

Smiljanich's skepticism doesn't sway Tracy Jones, 22, an administrative assistant in downtown Tampa. She's always a little more careful on Friday the 13th. She avoids stepping on cracks and sees no need to tempt fate.

"I don't walk under ladders, none of that," she said during a break Tuesday. "Maybe there's something to it, maybe not, but why play that game?"

Nonsense, said Marc Fischer, 44, a sales consultant.

"I'll break a mirror right now if you want," he said. "As I get older, I wouldn't mind breaking all of them."

Superstitions are such a part of human nature they're hard to avoid, Smiljanich said.

But he'll go about his business as usual today, unafraid of running into black cats, hockey-masked serial killers or anything scarier than Malfunction Junction. That's the life of a Skeptic.

"We believe in keeping an open mind," he said, "but we believe that if your mind is open to everything, it will fill up with trash."