

The History of Shroud.com

By Barrie Schwartz
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The Prelude

Speaking on the telephone with Dr. Alan Adler, STURP blood chemist, was always something of an adventure and every conversation was a truly unique experience! (Anyone who knew him can verify this). Sometime in mid-1995 I was having one of my regular telephone conversations with him, not realizing that this conversation would ultimately prove to be one of the most significant in my life.

At the time, I was still not completely convinced that the Shroud of Turin was authentic (and it was eighteen years after I had held it in my own hands)! Although the STURP data had clearly proved that the Shroud was not a painting or a photograph or a scorch or a rubbing, we had been unable to determine a mechanism that could create an image with those specific chemical and physical properties. However, based on the data we did have, I didn't believe for a moment that the Shroud of Turin was a medieval "hoax!" I stayed abreast of what was happening in the Shroud world, but there were still many unanswered questions and one of the most important ones was that no one had ever properly explained, (at least to me), why the blood stains on the Shroud were still reddish in color.

When the Shroud was first put before us in 1978, Vern Miller and I stood side by side over the cloth and we looked very closely at some of the dense red blood stains found there, and then at each other. I guess we could both see the doubt in each other's eyes, since we were both nodding slightly to the negative. We had each noticed the red color of the stains and we both believed that old blood was supposed to turn black or brown over time (and Vern had much more forensic experience than I did). If these stains were that old, why were they still red? Truthfully, at first glance, the stains did not really look like blood. We discussed it quietly and agreed that this observation cast some serious doubt on the validity of the stains. In my case, it was the last serious piece of the puzzle that kept me from accepting the Shroud as authentic.

Now, eighteen years later, the subject of the red blood came up during this conversation with Al and I told him it was something of a "deal breaker" for me. As I look back on that conversation today, I am puzzled as to why I had never asked him about this before. He was the most logical person to have discussed it with as he was the top blood expert on our team and had done the chemical analysis that proved the blood was actually blood. Yet, for some reason, it never came up until that moment. I guess the 1988 radiocarbon dating results had pushed everything else off the table.

It was then that Al Adler gave me the answer! He explained that extended torture, like that suffered by the man on the Shroud, causes the breakdown of the red blood cell walls and the flooding of bilirubin (an enzyme produced in the liver) into the bloodstream. Apparently, blood of that nature will remain red forever! There it was: a simple, straightforward answer from *the* expert.

I can't remember exactly how long after that conversation I took to reflect on everything before making the decision that there was only one answer possible about the Shroud: it had to be authentic. I remembered Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's axiom spoken through the lips of Sherlock Holmes, "If you

eliminate all the possibilities, whatever remains, no matter how improbable, is most likely the truth.” Based on that logic, there was only one answer possible. I had spent years studying the science of the Shroud and its image. After all that time, the scientific evidence had actually convinced me the Shroud of Turin was authentic! It was really something of a shock.

Truthfully, I had been a skeptic since the first day I was approached by Don Devan to join the STURP team in late 1976. Right from the beginning I believed the Shroud was most likely a painting. Not only that, but I felt uncomfortable because I was Jewish. I felt uncomfortable being surrounded by such high level scientists and me with just a bachelor’s degree in photography. I felt uncomfortable because I thought it might become a “Christian” project. I actually tried to quit! Twice! But in the end, I didn’t. When I got to Turin, I expected we would find paint and pigment immediately. I thought that would be the end of it. Yet, within the first hour of our examination I knew it was not painted. I realized at that moment this was going to be a longer journey than I ever imagined.

The Idea

A short time after I had the telephone conversation with Al Adler that put me over the threshold regarding the Shroud, I was sitting in the office of my studio when the phone rang again. On the line was a friend who wanted to share something “important” with me.

“You know that Shroud thing you are involved with?” he asked.

“Yes,” I said somewhat tentatively.

“Well, it turns out it is nothing more than a photograph made by Leonardo da Vinci! And that is Leonardo himself on the Shroud, sort of a self portrait.”

“Really? And where did you get this information?” I asked, somewhat amused at the thought. (This was the first time I had ever heard of the Leonardo theory).

“Well, my wife and I were checking out at the grocery store today and there, at the checkout counter, on one of the tabloids...”

I know that he continued talking and explaining his “discovery” to me and I know I pointed out how impossible this theory was from an historical point of view, but my mind had already wandered and I was busy having something of a simultaneous epiphany as he spoke. It had occurred to me at that very moment that the public had no reliable source of information about the Shroud, or the STURP team or its data, aside from a few books. I had been very privileged to be on that team and have access to all of the data. In fact, I was an “insider” and this was the first time I truly realized it. The general public doesn’t read scientific journals and the media had been getting everything wrong for years. I had been offended on many occasions by misleading or even totally false reports about STURP, its research and even its team members in the popular press. And at that very moment, on the cover of the manila folder sitting before me on my desk, I wrote the following four words: “consider building a website.”

The Result

I had first gotten onto the internet in late 1994 but had formed my first video production company in 1978 and purchased my first computer in 1979, so I was something of a technical person to begin with. It was the “early days” and the internet still felt like a community. People were friendly and shared things with each other. They were generally polite and policed themselves in a responsible manner. There was little or no commerce being done, aside perhaps between some individuals. There were no viruses, worms, malware, scams or spam. Most of the participants were, for want of a better term, geeks or tech-heads. But it was already showing its future potential. It allowed anyone to be a publisher and decentralized mass communication on a global scale. It allowed for instant global communications, and it was basically free. And it was against that background that I decided I should build a website about the Shroud of Turin. I had no idea what I was getting myself in to.

My first step was to buy a book on writing HTML code and learn how websites worked. There were no software programs or templates like we have today that virtually build a website for you. If you wanted it on the page, you had to write the code to put it there. I learned immediately that I needed to have a domain name, so I decided on shroud.com. People often ask me how I got such a choice domain name. The answer is simple: when I applied, it was available! There was virtually nothing about the Shroud on the internet in those early days, and, if you used one of the primitive search engines already available and searched on “shroud,” you would get a page about engine cowlings (also known as shrouds), but not a word about the Shroud of Turin.

By the time the HTML book arrived, it was the end of 1995 and the holidays were upon us. My son David and I had planned to head up to Lake Tahoe to do some back country snowmobiling in the Sierra Nevada Mountains over the holidays. So I took the book with me and studied it at night in our hotel room. It is not easy to learn to write computer code when you don’t have a computer. I had yet to get one of those new-fangled inventions, the laptop computer, so I wrote some code out on a separate sheet of paper. I was getting pretty excited at the prospect of working on the website as soon as we got home, so we left Tahoe early in the morning on January 1, 1996 and drove the 500 miles back to Los Angeles.

As soon as we arrived home, unpacked the car and got everything into the studio, I fired up my large computer workstation (less powerful than one of today’s smart phones) and started writing code! As my son looked over my shoulder, shroud.com began to take form. I worked on the site non-stop for the next twenty days and on January 21, 1996, I pushed the “send” button and the website went online. (In those days I called it my “three week wonder.”) The rest, as they say, is history.

I want to be clear on one more thing. I was not a visionary. I had no idea the internet would explode into what it ultimately became. If I had, I could have purchased some shares of Google and gotten rich! As the internet grew and expanded into the global force that it now is, I just stuck with the goal of keeping the public informed and keeping the truth available, without much spin or bias. And that seems to have worked pretty well. The site is at the top of all the search engines and millions of viewers of many different backgrounds have come from all over the world and for many different reasons. Perhaps the secret of our success is the statement on the first page of the site that has been there from the first day: “We believe that if you have access to the facts, you can make up your own mind about the Shroud.”

We don't pretend to have the answers, but we do present the data. In the end, we believe you have to decide this one for yourself.

Perhaps the hardest part of being the editor of shroud.com is that I frequently find myself caught in a debate between two researchers with different points of view (not unusual in the Shroud world). What makes it so hard is that often the debaters are both my good friends. Remaining neutral in such cases has taught me a lot about diplomacy. It is not easy!

Of course, since I am writing about the history of the site, I should also take this opportunity to share with you one of my ulterior motives in building it. Yes, it was critical to provide the public with access to STURP's data and conclusions and provide an honest assessment of what was known about the Shroud. But it was also critical to rehabilitate the STURP group's reputation, which had been somewhat tarnished, in part by their own actions (or lack of actions) after we returned from Turin. And of course, the results of the c14 dating in 1988 didn't help, as most of STURP's work was simply disregarded once the radiocarbon results were announced. However, one also has to remember that many of the STURP group worked for the government and on various weapons programs, so there was always an inherent atmosphere of secrecy that pervaded the team right from the beginning. Without question, STURP often regarded the media as the "enemy." It was definitely not a media-friendly group and in the end, that didn't help us much.

So the real goal of the site was not only to provide public access to the STURP data, but also to make sure that the work of the team did not fall into obscurity. As human beings, the team may have had some problems, but their science was carefully planned, totally empirical and their published work forms the primary database of scientific information that exists about the Shroud of Turin. Without doubt, STURP's data was the basis for most of the research that came afterwards.

I often say that starting something is easy but finishing is what really matters. And I don't think I am finished yet. There is still a lot of work to be done. After sixteen years, I can proudly say that we have, at least in part, accomplished some of those goals. And now that the website is in the hands of STERA, Inc., it will continue to work to further those goals in the future. What started as four words scribbled on a manila folder has grown to become the oldest, largest and most extensive Shroud resource on the internet. Not bad for an old geek!

Barrie Schwartz
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