

On Scorpions and Great Commissions

WARNING: Some may find the language in this editorial to be offensive

At the time I was writing Brand I had on my table a scorpion in an empty beer glass. From time to time the brute would ail; then I would throw a piece of ripe fruit in to it, on which it would cast itself in a rage and eject its poison; then it was well again.

— Henrik Ibsen

For some reason, not clear to me, I have for many years kept this quote on my desk beside my computer; it is always visible as I write. I know it is a bit strange, but there it is. I do not have an actual scorpion on my desk, but, as I think about this, maybe I should have. It worked for Ibsen.

The quote was given to me, years ago, by my eccentric friend Ian Johnston. He often wrote for the magazine when I was Editor from 2003 to 2008. He saw the scorpion story as metaphorical, which is fine, except that I was the scorpion, not Ibsen.

There may be something in this; Ian knows me well. In all of the 20 issues of *HPs* I edited there was something to rage about – a piece of ripe fruit upon which to cast myself and eject my poison. Issue 152 was devoted to covering the trial of Evelyn Martens, a 74-year-old grandmother arrested, shackled and prosecuted on two counts of assisting suicide. After two years of police harassment and then a month-long trial, Evelyn was found not guilty for lack of evidence. I attended the entire trial and wrote extensively about it for *HP*, upset by treatment of this good woman for her acts of human kindness.

In issue 164 I covered the shameful parole hearing for Robert Latimer where, after already serving a sentence seven times longer than recommended by his judge and jury, he was initially

denied parole. This shocking decision was reversed, following our own lobbying on the issue, leading to a successful appeal launched by the BC Civil Liberties Association.

There were other less grim but nevertheless outrageous issues that arose, such as the 2006 rejection by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) of a grant application by Brian Alters, an educational researcher at McGill. Alters did not care so much about the grant – he had plenty of other sources of funding – but he cared very much about the reason given for the rejection. His project was to investigate the impact on school children of the promotion, by various religious groups, of the idea of intelligent design, and to look at how it affected the kids' understanding of the idea of evolution. The letter of rejection stated that there was no reason to think evolution was a better idea than intelligent design.

The story became an international scandal, with scientists from all over the world expressing shock and disapproval, and in the magazine we hammered at the matter in several issues, demanding a retraction. When they stonewalled we wrote headlines on the cover of the magazine such as “SSHRC Continues to Embarrass Canada.” Still they held out and won a sort of victory



Photo: Wikimedia Commons

as the matter eventually died away. But it was a good battle while it lasted – ripe fruit indeed!

Some years later, I happened to serve a brief stint as head of the Humanist Association of Canada. We received a message from one of the principal actors at SSHRC during the skirmish – she had retired by this time and had previously frustrated us by her silence (after some initial goofy remarks). But apparently she could not bear to just let it go, which would have left us wondering if our efforts had failed to reach agency officials. She informed us that she was resigning her membership in HAC, because I had become President. It was a gratifying moment.

So the scorpion metaphor may not be a bad one, although one does not really like being compared to an arachnid. And what of Ian Johnston who saddled me with this image?

He is an extraordinarily imaginative and prolific writer. He has produced translations of at least 50 classical Greek, Latin, German and French works from the original Greek, Latin, German and French. He has posted millions of words on his website – all of his translations and innumerable essays, workbooks and lectures. All of this is free for anyone to use and many people have done so. I asked Ian for a few thousand new words on reason and belief for this issue of *HP*. A few days later he got back to me and told me he had good news and bad news. The good was that he had finished the article. The bad was that it was 16,000 words.

“Ian,” I said, “that’s the entire magazine!”

“I couldn’t help it,” he replied. “Asking me to

write on this topic was like giving me an enema.”

I sent him back to his computer.

The enema image reminded me of one of countless strange stories Ian has told me about his life (stories which I fear are all true). I had mentioned to him that my wife and I were going to take a trip along the Rhone River in France.

“Oh I did that by bicycle many years ago,” he said, then added, “I set a world record.”

What in the world was he talking about, I wondered. He was no athlete. What record could he have set? I questioned him – it turned out to be something I thought was not humanly possible.

“Well,” he said, “It is not official. But I doubt that anyone has beat it . . . I didn’t have what the French call ‘une grande commission’ for 8 days.”

He went on to explain. “On my way to France I came down with diarrhea. I happened to go to an Italian doctor who gave me pills for the condition, but his English was not very good and I misunderstood his instructions. He said to take 1/3 of a pill each day, but I thought he said three.”

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Until I heard this story I was unfamiliar with the expression “une grande commission,” and the related “une petite commission.” It was difficult to find much about these terms but I did find a reference to them in a dictionary of colloquial French – so they are real. I think they are a sacrilegious play on the “Great Commission” put forward in Matthew 28: 19-20, purporting to be Jesus’ final command to his apostles: “Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing

them in the name of the Father and the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them everything I have commanded you.”

We as humanists have our own sense of a great purpose, but it is different from the Christian Great Commission (and I hope from the colloquial grande commission). We do not try to “make disciples” but instead attempt to encourage free enquiry; we do not baptize followers but instead try to foster intellectual independence; we do not “command” but instead challenge entrenched beliefs. To use Darwin’s words, we encourage “the gradual illumination of minds.” We support no ordained and unquestioned beliefs; we seek only reason, justice and tolerance in the conduct of human affairs.

Or at least I hope and wish this to be so.

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I am very pleased that *HP* has asked me to be a guest editor for some issues of this venerable magazine. Many thanks to co-editors Madeline Weld and Richard Young, and to Simon Parcher, President of the Board. We are up to 205 issues and still going strong.

As in my earlier stint as editor, I will specify a theme that governs, to some extent, the content of each issue I am responsible for editing. The theme this time is “Reason and Belief,” which admittedly is pretty broad. One could argue that the conflict between reason and belief is at the heart of humanism and that every article in a humanist magazine could well touch upon that idea. Probably true, but in assembling this issue the writers will try to illuminate aspects of the idea in a compelling way.

A feature that the regular editors (Richard and Madeline) sometimes added to the magazine is a called “A Timely Comment,” reflecting upon some current item in the news. For this issue I have contributed a commentary on certain legal issues that arose in the recent trial of Gerald Stanley for the murder of the young indigenous man Colten Bouchie. In recent years I have been writing quite a bit about our justice system, and the flaws therein, and the Stanley trial highlighted some of these legal beliefs that don’t hold up so well when subjected to reasoned scrutiny.

Jim Alcock’s contribution is an excerpt from his monumental new book, *Belief – what it means to believe and why our convictions are so compelling*. Jim, who wrote many columns for *HP* in the 2000s, is one of the preeminent world authorities on the subject of belief, with his many years of teaching psychology, his many books and articles and his long-time, central role with the Center for Inquiry. His new book is the culmination of his life’s work, and he was kind enough to let us use an excerpt, which I think readers will find most interesting.

Philosopher Trudy Govier also was a regular columnist for *HP* in past years, and she is the author of many books, including a widely-used logic text called “A Practical Study of Argument.” Lately Trudy has been writing dialogues, one of which she has given us for this issue of the magazine. The subject is offensive language and its conflict with freedom of speech. How absolute is that freedom? Are hurt feelings justification for censorship? Is warning about offensive content sufficient? The protagonists each come to the discussion with certain beliefs that are all challenged by the rational arguments of the others.

Trudy’s dialogue will connect with the theme of “Free Speech” in next winter’s issue of *HP*. We hope, then, to publish some reactions to the dialogue from our readers.

The essay by Robert Weyant on Darwin’s wife Emma explores the crucial impact Emma had on her husband’s life and work. She never gave up her own religious beliefs, even while being so close for so long to the man who provided so much reason to think otherwise.

In my previous time as editor, the magazine had a final page section called “The Last Word.” The standard format has changed so that we have book reviews at the end of the magazine, so I have “Nearly the Last Word” just before the reviews – a short piece, by writer Carol Matthews, about beliefs and old age.

I have already said enough (too much?) about Ian Johnston, and will just let his essay stand on its own.

My thanks to all of these writers for making my task as editor of this issue an easy one.

Now, if you will excuse me, I need to look for a scorpion. •

– Gary Bauslaugh