

Illuminations

Some years ago I was hosting a celebrated medical practitioner from Britain. He was keynote speaker at some event at the College where I worked, and my job was to welcome him graciously and take him to lunch – and though it was not a difficult assignment I did not especially look forward to it. But I did want to do it right.

A few years earlier, at the same College (in Nanaimo, BC), I had been asked by the College President to organize an upcoming visit of the Queen and Prince Philip. I think it was a form of punishment (for what I was never sure). While not exactly relishing this assignment, I did want to do it right, so among many other details I had to attend to I carefully coached everyone who would encounter the Royals on the strict protocols that are in play at such events. One of the most important was not to initiate any action, like handshaking or even speaking. It was all right to respond to the Royals – if one of them reached out you could then shake his or her hand, but not otherwise. And if one of them asked a question you could answer. Otherwise, you were to keep quiet! This, I thought, would not be difficult for people to remember.

By the time the visit actually occurred I was quite distracted, trying to be sure everything was as it should be. At one point, just as the Royals were about to arrive, the Chair of the College Board came up to me and complained about where he and the other Board members had been located. “Too late to change that,” I told him in a slightly exasperated voice. “There are already hundreds of people contentedly waiting in their designated places. What am I supposed to do, ask some of them to move?”

The Chairman looked at me, silently, but with an expression that seemed to say, “Do you like working here?”

Finally, the guests of honour arrived and I

made my way to a receiving line. The Queen passed by without incident, and then came Philip. The College President introduced me to him as the person who had organized all of this. “Yeah,” I volunteered, “and I’m exhausted.” It was the scandal of the day. (Philip laughed.)

So back to the medical guy – I think he was some sort of acclaimed authority on nursing. I did not especially like him when I met him – he was lofty in a British sort of way. But my job was just to be friendly and gracious. How hard could that be? It was like, say, greeting the Royals.

I had recently been reading about something that was, and I think still is, popular in Canadian nursing circles – a procedure called “therapeutic touch.” The idea is that the medical practitioners run their hands over the bodies of patients without actually touching them. Somehow this action would manipulate energy fields around the body and this would have a beneficial effect. But no such fields have ever been detected – they are supposedly accessible only to highly sensitive practitioners, a supposition that was disproven by a simple experiment carried out by a nine-year-old girl! (See Dale Beyerstein’s article for more on this.)

I was appalled to discover that our nursing department believed in this practice and thought this would be a good topic to discuss with our eminent medical guest. We could laugh together at the absurdity of this pseudoscientific procedure, which surely would not be taken seriously in the old country

Well into the lunch, with conversation flagging, I thought the time was right.

“You know,” I said, “there are some pretty silly beliefs floating around nursing schools in Canada. A number of them actually teach classes in therapeutic touch!”

The immediate silence which followed alerted me to the fact that, once again, I had said some-

thing very wrong. When he answered me it was with new level of coldness:

“I teach such a class.”

And then the conversation really flagged.

If one’s role is simply to follow protocol, as with greeting the Queen and Philip, then that is probably what you should do, regardless of what you think about the Royalty. My gaffe was unintentional, and at least it was not as bad as that committed by the hapless civic official in northern Ontario who, having prepared respectful comments to make when presenting the City’s gift to the Queen, panicked at the critical moment, shoved the package at the startled monarch, and blurted out, “Here, Queen, this is for you.”

But what about the sort of situation I was in with the nursing guy? When confronted by such irrationality, should one abandon grace and speak truth to folly, as in Tim Minchin’s wonderful beat poem “Storm” (see it, please, on You Tube). In exasperation, and in more colourful language than I dare use here, he threatens to ask his naïve antagonist if she is a [bleeping] two-year-old. Should I have said to the nursing guy, “What are you, a [bleeping] two-year-old?”

One runs into people with irrational beliefs all the time, often very smart people. It drives me mad. My wife and I were once driving through bucolic farm country on Vancouver Island with a friend – a well-regarded academic whose views I usually much respected. We stopped to talk to a farmer walking along the road, and the conversation turned to the availability of well water.

“I imagine you consult with a diviner before drilling,” George asked the farmer.

“Yep, sure do,” he replied.

I held my tongue, not wanting to take on, with the farmer, centuries of entrenched country tradition. But when we drove on I said to George, “Of course you know that water divining is nonsense.”

“No, it’s not,” he retorted. “It has a long history of success.”

“No, it does not,” I replied with a mixture of anger and despair. “If you drill you are going to hit water sooner or later – there is water down there.

It has nothing to do with anything a water diviner and his twitching stick supposedly deduce. How could it? What is a plausible mechanism? What are you, [bleeping] two?”

Well, no, I did not include that last sentence, but I was tempted to say something like that. I did point out that objective tests have been carried out with diviners, who were asked to locate the position of water pipes, with water running through them, hidden under a platform. They all thought they could do it, but none could.

But railing about beliefs seems to have little impact on believers. I think George still believes in diviners. Fortunately, though, our friendship survived, probably because I refrained from using the Minchin quote. But these displays of irrationality still drive me mad.

As a younger academic I could not bear public claims about the efficacy of pseudoscientific beliefs (ones that claimed truth in the absence of supporting evidence or, more often, contrary to evidence). I railed against the claims of so-called psychics, astrologers, advocates of alternative medicine and many others. I was dumfounded by homeopathic claims that dilution of an active ingredient to the point where not a single molecule of it remains can be an effective medication, because the water “remembers” the ingredient having been there. Many grownups actually believe this. It still drives me mad.

But the real question, as always, is how do we best deal with irrational beliefs. Beliefs are beliefs and are resistant to change. James Alcock in this issue of HP explores the problem with much insight and sensitivity, as he did in his recently published book: *Belief – what it means to believe and why our convictions are so compelling*. His answer, frustratingly for me, is (in part at least) not to rail.

In these matters, as in matters of religion, it is better to aim not at smack-downs but, as Darwin put it, at “the gradual illumination of minds.”

So, no, I should not have gone after the nursing guy, at that time and at that place. Restraint is a hard lesson for skeptics, but one we should always keep in mind. Our effectiveness depends on it. •

– Gary Bauslaugh