

# The Grad Zone

The UNB Graduate Student Association

## Seeing is believing

by Peter Ferguson

Last week a number of fellow biologists and I were relaxing in the Faculty Club after a stimulating departmental discussion about what exactly is scientific about biological research. As we were reviewing a number of points brought up in the discussion we broadened the talk to include science in general until finally the topic steered toward that eternal question: is "Star Trek: the next generation" science? Or, more correctly, is there any science in Star Trek? We concluded there was not.

The show uses the backdrop of space exploration and advanced technology as a means of exploring human nature, western culture and American social values. Stunning special effects are an attractive feature of the show but quite simply, there are frequent lapses in logic and convenient breaking of scientific laws (as we currently formulate them). And does this detract from our enjoyment of the show? Not one

bit. We suspended our disbelief during the show to keep up with the fast-paced action. But we were able to analyze what we saw and entertain ourselves after by picking out the "pseudoscience".

I believe this is not so for many in the viewing public. A few weeks previous I had a similar discussion concerning the lack of science in Star Trek but with a non-scientist. He found it hard to believe I could pick out so many flaws in the show and still claim I found it entertaining. More adamant was he that Star Trek WAS scientific. He argued that Star Trek dealt with phenomena that scientists studied (or could conceivably study). I did not argue with this as this statement is reasonable. In fact, I gave up arguing altogether when I realized that my explanation of relativity and time as I understand it (as a non-physicist) was falling on deaf ears.

I'm not so much concerned with this incident in itself as I am with the larger question of how people come by their beliefs. I

realize this is a topic that has occupied philosophers and psychologists for as long as these disciplines have existed. "Kin" Hubbard (1856 - 1915) wasn't so far off the mark when he defined an ignorant man thusly: "It's not so much what he doesn't know as what he knows that just ain't so". This has come down in the current vernacular as Jello Biafra's "F\*\*\* Facts Principle" - people believe what they want to believe.

How much more often we hear "I think . . ." rather than "I think. (period)". I'm very much an optimist but I've come to accept that "I think . . ." is a give away that no real thinking has occurred to generate the opinion which follows it. Consider, for example, those polls that come out every so often that present a certain (uncomfortably high) percentage of people believing in UFO's, astrology, numerology, or ESP. Yes! Elvis lives!

These people have certainly never critically examined these beliefs. And these people are eli-

gible to vote! (Which perhaps explains much about the electoral success of the previous U.S. president).

Consider now the potentially more dangerous mind that does not preface it's opinions by a convenient "tag". This is a person more likely to hold his views more strongly and unshakably in the face of "facts" or reasonable arguments. They "know" certain things to be true. They have a battery of their own "facts" that uphold their beliefs.

Take, for example, all the chatter concerning constitutional reforms. For the past few weeks Dick and Jane off the street have been given the opportunity to present their views (on national television) on the future of Canada. An article in the Globe and Mail last week suggested that while this makes good public relations to lessen the fear of backroom deals that seems to frighten many Canadians, it is doubtful that the "average" Canadian really possessed the facts and critical thinking skills to

"chart Canada's future" (as the heroic sounding plea goes). How much real information can Canadians extract from television news programs where the issues are predigested and simplified to accommodate a two minute attention span? How do the large number of functionally illiterate Canadians arrive at their decisions concerning the economy, political leadership, or constitutional amendments? And what about those Canadians who are "aliterate" - a term coined a few years ago to describe those who can read but choose not to?

I certainly don't mean to suggest that a ruling elite is preferable to democracy nor to deny certain segments of the population the right to vote. I am suggesting that a willingness to re-examine our beliefs and to truly test them is in order. That's what education is about. Not just learning new ideas, but reassessing our old ideas, too.

"Seeing is believing" is just a comfortable old excuse to avoid genuine thinking.

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