

Science Mind, Literary Mind

DRAFT

A response to a question posed by Fred Swanson which I interpreted as, “How do the aspects of (my) mind that try to address the world from a scientific perspective mesh or intersect with those that try to create poetry or other word art, those concerned with a different audience or, at least, an audience with different expectations?”

This response, while probably not adequately direct, may imply some answers glancingly:

1. The idea of a divided mind runs against my instincts.
2. Robert Bringhurst says something like this – the impulse behind Haida myth was to explain why the world behaves as it does. This is very similar to the impulse behind scientific inquiry.
3. What is similar – the impulse towards story, coherence, the artful telling of that story. What differs (we hope) is the self-correcting rigor of the scientific story. [To what extent is myth provisional? As with fundamentalist religions, there seems often to be a tendency to consider a myth version inviolate, but this isn't always the case.]
4. The argots of science communicate to limited subcultures. This may also be true of technical invocations (hypotheses, evidence, etc.) of the processes of science.
5. Perceptions of phenomena are mediated by our senses and wiring, which are in turn evolutionarily sculpted for survival. The objective and the rational are sometimes (often?) compromised. Economic behavioralists have shown this clearly. We have hardwired biases that are hard to discover, much less correct. For these reasons (at least) it can be a struggle to perceive and reason clearly.
6. We can be convinced, at least temporarily, by the music of language. By the charisma of the speaker. By the design of the page. These can be employed towards righteous ends. They can also be traps and quicksand.
7. Curiosity is central – that cat-like persistent worrying and prodding the world (out there) and the mind (in here). That never-leaving-well-enough-alone.
8. My niece who teaches science to hormone-poisoned 7th graders must know, or intuit, far better than I, how curiosity flourishes and dies and might be rekindled. The roles of anxiety, poverty, cell phones, and bullying included.
9. What is also central is a skeptical, but fair, evaluation of explanations & evidence. Intellectual honesty. A balance of humility and the judicial temperament.
10. Rarer is the ability to effectively employ imagination. To leap to an unexpected but potentially solid piece of ground and land upright. If the land doesn't break away, hallelujah!
11. The tricks of entertainment. The audience wants to be surprised and to be reassured. Some balance between the two can be efficacious. Exhaust or bore them, and they will fade away. [Still, some audiences can be challenged to good effect.] Music can work – the music of language. Emotion. Horror. Humor. Vivid images.

12. Less disguised 'scientisms' (words, concepts) can be sprinkled into works a bit like pepper – to spice the soup. Best, however, if their meanings can be deduced from context or that, at least, the mysteries don't put the readers or listeners off the track.
13. In writing my first audience is myself. If that audience gets bored, distracted or scared off then the entire enterprise collapses.

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