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Just in time . . .

Posted on December 2nd, 2010 by earlehollland

This morning's New York Times carried a [story](#) deep inside about an event held at New York's 92nd Street YMHA, a venue long admired for its attention to the arts. It seems that comedian and actor Steve Martin had been the focus of an onstage conversation with Times' columnist Deborah Soloman.

A long-time friend of Martin's, she led a discussion focusing on his new novel, *An Object of Beauty*, and his view of the art world.

But midway through the discussion, she was handed a message asking that she focus the dialogue more on Martin's career and less on art. Complaints had arisen from the audience that the event was not what they expected and they were miffed.

The Times story explained that the organization's leadership had offered that night's patrons refund coupons for a future program as acquiescence to the audience's disappointment. The leadership, it seemed, was not expecting a literate, literary discussion.

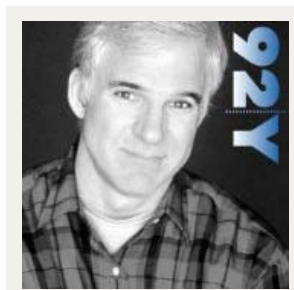
The controversy – which shocked and embarrassed both Martin and Soloman – fueled a flashback to a similar incident at Ohio State. In 1999, I had invited Key Davidson, an award-winning science writer for the San Francisco Examiner, to campus to give a talk about his latest work – a voluminous [biography of astronomer Carl Sagan](#).

The book, one of two biographies of Sagan out that year, had been a labor of love for Davidson, himself a graduate historian. Sagan's renown as a "visible scientist," coupled with juicy insider tidbits such as details of Carl's marijuana use and failed marriage, had netted massive news coverage and subsequent interest had filled a nearly thousand-seat auditorium with faculty and students.

But what followed was more like the reading of an academic journal article than it was the spicy inside-look at the country's most famous modern scientist. And 15 minutes into the talk, the audience's squirming was rampant.

This was not what they had expected, and before it was over, two-thirds of the audience had left.

The saving grace came when after the talk ended and the audience was filing out, one of the most esteemed faculty members on campus walked up and thanked me for what he said was "the most literate presentation he had



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heard on campus in years.”

I happily passed this on to Keay and ignored the large-scale discontent.

As a people, we have evolved to the point that our expectations are so clear in our minds that any variance from that image provokes anger and discontent. While we may claim to want the new and innovative, we’re most content with the familiar.

Last month, at the annual gathering of professional science writers, a panel of scholars and writers debated the state of scientific literacy in America. It was, all agreed, a sorry condition. The latest studies have shown that by any measure, barely one in three Americans are, in any way, “literate” about science. The long-standing argument: How can the electorate understand issues such as healthcare policy, climate change, stem cell research or evolution without understanding science?

One answer, espoused by author Chris Mooney, was the strategy of partnering science with rock stars, the idea being that young people flock to this music and, if those musicians they adore publicly support science,



then that support will infect young followers, strengthening our national scientific literacy. Mooney has authored books on [scientific literacy](#) and [political intervention in science](#).

Not so, said [Jon Miller](#), a professor at Michigan State University and arguably one of the country’s most knowledgeable scholars focused on the scientific literacy problem. Miller has spent more than two decades assessing public understanding of science for the National Science Board. He says that the way most of us learned in the past is outdated.

Miller refers to what he calls a “warehouse” model of learning where people were taught facts which they put on a mental shelf so that they could be used some later day off in the future.

“Warehouses are gone now. We have a ‘just-in-time’ system of getting information. People are no longer stocking their mental warehouses.”

Miller’s view of how people learn today applies well to most of our interests. We will diligently seek out information about what we want to know about.

But for areas which hold little appeal, well, we seem content with our ignorance. __ *Earle Holland*



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One Response to “Just in time . . .”

Dick Burry // Jan 22, 2011 at 5:37 pm

The talk about science education and Jon Miller's statements that people learn differently today raises several questions. Certainly, today we have rapid access to a greater depth of factual information than 25 years ago. A case has been made by Jon Miller that we do not need to learn so many facts. However, the second question and more important question, is how can we think and solve problems. The ability to abstractly manipulate several concepts and arrive at a new concept is crucial to science today. With my background training graduate students in biomedical sciences, mastery of many concepts is important to this process. Actually, students frequently mistake the learning of abstract concepts for the learning of facts. Without enough factual information a student cannot master an abstract concept. So getting back to Jon Miller, whatever system students use to learn, manipulation of abstract ideas should be their highest goal.

Dick Burry

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