

FIG Leaves

Volume 11 Issue 10

October 2002

October Meeting

TASLIMA NASRIN

Internationally celebrated Bangladeshi humanist

Taslima Nasrin will discuss her life and views at a meeting of FIG on Tuesday, October 29. She had to flee her country in 1994, when fundamentalists pronounced a fatwa against her. Since her escape, the author has been living in exile in Sweden, Germany, and France.

The onetime Government doctor is a novelist and poet, and critic of the treatment of women in Muslim countries and in the Koran. In heavily Islamic Bangladesh, her ideas are blasphemous. Concerned about the treatment of minorities, her 1993 novel, *Shame*, depicted a murderous rampage by Bangladeshi Muslims against the nation's Hindu minority.

Dr. Nasrin will discuss and sign her recently published book,

Meyebela, My Bengali Girlhood: A Memoir of Growing Up Female in a Muslim World. A reviewer, Nora Boustany, said in the *Washington Post* on September 11, 2002: "Taslima Nasrin, the fiery feminist from Bangladesh who angered the Muslim clergy in her country by questioning the Koran and writing about sexuality, has written a brutally honest and brave memoir of her childhood to the age of 14." A sequel, *Wild Wind*, has been banned in Bangladesh for "anti-Islam sentiments." It is not yet available in this country.

PLEASE HELP US PUBLICIZE TASLIMA NASRIN'S TALK!

We are fortunate to have this internationally respected humanist heroine come to talk to FIG. However, because of the fatwa on her, we have not sought newspaper publicity for her talk to FIG. So please spread the word to your friends and to organizations which may want to tell their members about her talk. If you want announcements suitable for posting or handing out, contact Joeleeve@aol.com.

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Events

October Meeting

TASLIMA NASRIN

Tuesday, October 29th
at 7:00

Vernon Manor Hotel

November Potluck

Tuesday, November 12th at
6:30 pm

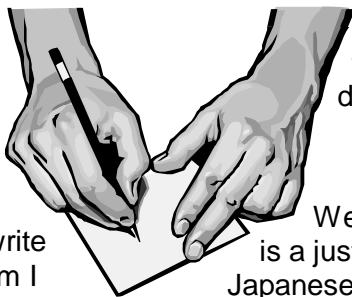


Letter From the Editor

Dear Fig members,

I have lots of interesting things to write about, but as I try to choose among them I keep coming back to the realization that we are probably going to attack another country soon, people will die, the body count will dutifully register total American casualties and only estimate the foreign dead. Most of us will try to keep the hum of planned violence sufficiently in the background so we can get to work on time and remember to set the garbage pails out front on the right day. I've just finished reading "Swimming Across" a memoir by Andrew Grove, the Chairman of Intel. When he arrived in New York harbor in 1956, a Hungarian refugee, and saw his first American streets and houses, he remarked to himself, that these houses "have never known war". While technically that remains true to this day, I believe that as Americans, not just new Yorkers, even those of us in the midlands don't feel safe and protected by oceans, by distance from "over there". I don't have to tell you why. I do feel safe on airplanes, because I know that every other passenger, while seemingly tapping away on a laptop or watching the movie, is really on high alert watching every other passenger for a sign, listening to their neighbor's conversations, just in case.

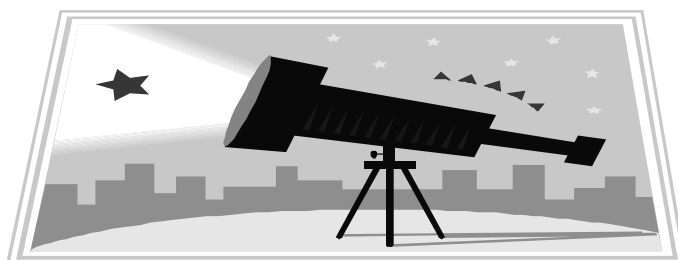
We've lost our balance, our cocoon has been breached, we are scared. "Department of Homeland Defense"; that sounds like something out of a WWII movie, with rationing and gas coupons, not a 21st century design. So, what else is being thrown over the barriers, necessary to eject in order to restore an impregnable perimeter? We are lightening our load, kicking out subtleties that impede restoration of national calm: civil liberties, fine distinctions between concepts like "war on terror" and actually declaring war on another nation. What does "regime change" mean, anyhow? I thought it had to do with elections, like when the Democrats took control of the Senate or when the Republicans got the White House back from the Democrats. Is it discussed in the Constitution? I haven't read the constitution in a long time, of course. Isn't Congress supposed to declare war? What are those guys doing in Guantanamo? How long can we keep them there without charging



them? (Not for rent, but for a crime.) Isn't that what the bad guys do, "indefinite detention"? We don't do that.

Well, maybe we do, when we're scared. Fear is a justification for lots of things; interning the Japanese in WWII, school segregation, Vietnam. But we usually learn that short-term responses are costly in the long term and in retrospect swear that we'll never do that again. That's a relief!

ID



Poem

Twinkle, twinkle, little star,
How I wonder what you are
Up above the world so high,
Like a diamond in the sky.
Jane Taylor (1783-1824)

Twinkle, twinkle, little star,
I know *exactly* what you are.
You're just a sun. How do I know?
My science teacher told me so.

FIG Leaves Volume 11, Issue 10, October 2002 - Editors welcome thoughtful articles, letters, reviews, reports, anecdotes, and cartoons. Submit in electronic format via Internet to figeditor@choice.net or on disk or typewritten via mail to Editor, FIG Leaves, P.O. Box 8128, Cincinnati OH 45208. Contributions received before the first Tuesday of the month will be considered for publication that month. All material printed in FIG Leaves may be reproduced in similar publications of non-profit groups which grant FIG Leaves reciprocal reprinting rights as long as proper credit is clearly attributed to FIG Leaves and the author. Opinions expressed in FIG Leaves are those of their authors and do not necessarily reflect opinions of the editor or the Free Inquiry Group, Inc., its Board, or officers. © 2000 The Free Inquiry Group, Inc. FIG Board of Directors: President: Philip Ferguson, Vice President: Michele Grinoch, Secretary: George Maurer, Treasurer: Joe Levee Members: Frank Bicknell, Nurit Bowman, Martha Ferguson, Edwin Kagin, Helen Kagin, Tim Kelly, Inez Klein, Bryan Sellers and FIG Leaves Editor: Idelle Datlof.

FYI: WORTH A LOOK

CHURCH ELECTIONEERING BILL REJECTED IN HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Americans United Praises House Vote Preserving Integrity of Houses of Worship, Political Process

A bill to allow tax-exempt houses of worship to intervene in partisan political campaigns was strongly rejected today in the House of Representatives. The final vote was 239-178 against the legislation. Americans United for Separation of Church and State, a leading opponent of the legislation, praised the action.

"The House did the right thing by rejecting this reckless scheme," said the Rev. Barry W. Lynn, executive director of Americans United. "This bill may have been the Religious Right's dream, but it was a nightmare for anyone concerned with the integrity of houses of worship and the political process."

Rep. Walter B. Jones' "Houses of Worship Political Speech Protection Act" (H.R. 2357) was drafted by attorneys with TV preacher Pat Robertson's American Center for Law and Justice and is being aggressively pushed by numerous Religious Right organizations. The measure sought to change federal tax law to allow houses of worship to use their personnel and other resources to endorse or oppose candidates for public office.

Federal tax law currently prohibits non-profit groups, including houses of worship, from intervening in partisan campaigns if they are tax exempt under Section 501©(3) of the tax code. H.R. 2357 would have lifted that regulation—but only for houses of worship.

AU's Lynn said that today's vote was the right call.

"Most Americans do not want their churches turned into smoke-filled rooms where political deals are cut and partisan politics replaces worship," Lynn said. "When people put their money in the collection plate, they don't expect it to be used for candidates' campaign literature and attack ads."

Jones and other congressional sponsors had argued that the bill was necessary to protect the right of religious leaders to speak out on moral issues. AU's Lynn called this argument "nonsense."

"Religious leaders are already free to expose moral evils, propose ethical solutions and hold our leaders to the highest standards," Lynn said. "the only thing that tax law prohibits is intervention by tax-exempt groups in political campaigns."

The House rejected the legislation despite intense lobbying efforts by the Religious Right. Some of the movement's largest groups and most prominent leaders endorsed the bill, including the Christian Coalition, the American Family Association, Concerned Women for

America, the Family Research Council, James Dobson of Focus on the Family and TV preachers Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell. The Southern Baptist Convention, a denomination closely aligned with the Religious Right, also endorsed the measure.

Religious Right groups were eager to get rid of the federal tax law provision so they could legally use churches as cogs in a political machine.

Nevertheless, religious leaders and organizations from across the theological spectrum announced opposition to H.R. 2357. They include the American Jewish committee; the American Jewish Congress; the Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs; the Central Conference of American Rabbis; the Church of the Brethren Washington Office; the Friends Committee on National Legislation (Quakers); the General Board of Church and Society, United Methodist Church; the National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA; the Presbyterian Church (USA), Gakkai International—USA Buddhist Association; Union of American Hebrew Congregations; the Unitarian Universalist Association and the United Church of Christ Justice and Witness Ministries.

the bill was also opposed by leading civil rights organizations including the NAACP and the National Congress of Black Churches.

Americans United is a religious liberty watchdog group based in Washington, D.C. Founded in 1947, the organization educates Americans about the importance of church-state separation in safeguarding religious freedom.

Beth Corbin
National Grassroots Organizer
Americans United for Separation of Church and State
www.au.org

Humanists on Public T.V.

Local humanists are encouraged to tune in to Cincinnati public access to The Humanist Perspective.

The Humanist Perspective is a thirty-minute show created and hosted by Joe Beck at The Center for Inquiry. It is distributed and aired nationally on public access channels with the help of local sponsors. The Humanist Perspective is an interview-style show that deals with various topics of interest to the humanist community.

Here are the updated times for The Humanist Perspective which runs on local public access (the new times took effect on 9/7/02):

Tuesdays at 6:00am on Channel 24
Fridays at 9:00am on Channel 8

FYI: COPENHAGEN

A dozen people attended FIG's discussion of the televised performance of the play "Copenhagen" on October 1. Those who did were pleased with the lively discussion of the play and of the historical mystery.

We enjoyed Carolyn Ruth Hunt's discussion of the artistic aspects of the play. She was following the dialogue in the TV production with the script of the play and was disappointed to see how much had been left out. This made the events of the play harder to follow but more importantly left out some of the most interesting discussions among the characters.

Bill Jensen's comments on the play showed how closely he has studied the historical aspects of the actual events. After analyzing the controversial record he concluded that the main purpose of Heisenberg's trip to Copenhagen was to persuade Bohr that scientists should agree to work against development of the atomic bomb. He explained why he felt that Bohr misread Heisenberg's intentions. This led to a lively discussion of how difficult it is to interpret another's intentions and how the situation may influence our reading of the other's intentions.

You will have another chance to discuss this play and the historical interpretation if you participate in the FIG group's visit to the performance of "Copenhagen" at the Ensemble Theater at 2:30 PM on Sunday, February 9. If you are interested contact Carolyn Ruth Hunt at 513-662-5532 promptly. Tickets will cost \$28 or less, depending on whether you are a senior citizen and what kind of group discount may be available. We will try to find a good place to eat after the show so we can discuss the performance and the historical interpretation of the dramatic meeting in wartime Copenhagen.

Joe Levee

UPDATE:

Proposed bus to Washington for the Godless Americans March

We are sorry to report that our efforts in Cincinnati and Columbus combined did not yield enough support for the proposed bus trip to Washington.

Ten deposits came in from the Greater Cincinnati area and eight from Columbus. Dividing the bus rental cost of \$2,600 by these 18 people would result in a cost per person of \$144.

We have sent the email addresses of everyone who expressed an interest in the bus trip to all the others who did. Therefore they can contact each other with any ideas of car pooling, renting a van, etc.

One FIG member suggested contacting Delta for last minute deals at <http://delta.com/travel/sp_offers/web_fares/index.jsp> He says on a recent weekend a round trip to Washington-Dulles was \$98. Such deals are available only close to the weekend -- just how close I don't know. Travelocity and other flight brokers might yield good deals from here or other airports not too far from Cincinnati.

Joe Levee

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BOOK REVIEW

The Assassination of Lumumba

by Ludo de Witte

(trans: Ann Wright and Renee Fenby)

(London: Verso, 2001)

Today, when we are once again trying to drive a duly elected leader we don't like out of office, it is perhaps a good time to remind ourselves of the murder of Patrice Lumumba on 17 January 1961. At the end of the Eisenhower and the beginning of the Kennedy administrations, Lumumba was the democratically elected Prime Minister of the Congo Republic, the former Belgian Congo. The Belgian government was primarily responsible for the deed, but they could not have proceeded without the connivance of the Americans and the British, and their support in the UN. None of the western imperial powers approved of the African politician, and so Lumumba had to go.

The Belgian Congo colony came into existence at the end of the nineteenth century in a rather bloody history. Created as the private domain of the Belgian King Leopold II, wild rubber exploitation was driven by violence, mutilations, and murder to line the pockets of the investors. The scandal became so rank, that in 1908 the Belgian state had to deprive the King of the territory to administer the colony. This history was well remembered among the living when the Congo became independent on 1 July 1960. At the independence ceremony and in the presence of the current Belgian King, the newly elected Prime Minister made it quite clear that Congolese had not forgotten the oppression they had suffered. His unscheduled remarks set the scene for a nationalism which would brook no further tutelage by Belgian advisors and international corporations. Four weeks later the Congolese army revolted against their white officers.

As the country descended into chaos, the army had to be rapidly reorganized with quickly promoted Congolese officers, but local mutinies continued. Several ethnic groups declared their provinces independent of the Congo. The most important of these new "states" was the south-eastern province of Katanga, which contained the most important mineral resources, especially the copper and uranium mines. The UN organization was called upon to restore order, and American planes carried them and their supplies to Leopoldville, now renamed Kinshasa.

In this disorder, the prime minister, Patrice

Lumumba was the only national figure. A spell binding orator in several languages, he was the only person who could mobilize support from all regions of the country. He was seen by the western powers as a trouble maker, who could or would not return peace to the Congo. When he asked the Soviet Union for help with men and material, the United States, Britain, and Belgium agreed that Lumumba must go. He was arrested, transferred, escaped, was returned to jail, and eventually murdered only six months after independence.

One can construct three hypotheses about events in the Congo. The first is the one pursued by de Witte. Essentially, that Belgium and other neo-colonialists expected to keep control of the Congo despite independence. That western powers and mineral corporations feared for their industries, and would not consider the real freedom aspired to by Lumumba. Hence they murdered him. A second hypothesis considers that the Congo was very unprepared for independence. Given Lumumba's intention for complete freedom, chaos ensued. In the confusion many different interests interfered in the country. All of the outsiders, and many of the dissidents within the country wanted Lumumba out of the way. Hence, he was murdered. That is roughly the way I see events of the time.

A third, more conservative view, feared Lumumba as a crypto-communist, feared that actualized self-rule under his aegis would result in a "communist" Congo. Insisted that order had to be restored, and thus Lumumba had to go. Good evidence shows that forces in the US and other western powers saw it that way.

Looking back at the events of the time with perfect hind sight, it is clear that we destroyed the only leader the whole Congo had at the time. The threat from the Soviet Union seems a mere chimaera today. The Congolese turmoil ended in corruption and neglect, for forty years we supported a "stable" dictatorship which has been described as a *kleptocracy*. The murder of Lumumba is forgotten. But, was it a good idea to do away with the only national leader the people had at the time?

Wolf Roder

on American complicity in the assassination read: Stephen R. Weissman, "Opening the Secret Files on Lumumba's Murder." *Washington Post*, (21 July 2002)

FIG Meeting September 24, 2002

Speaker: Eric F. Maurer, Director Environmental Studies Program, University of Cincinnati

Subject: Global Climate Change and Ecology

The speaker began by outlining what he was to be discussing in the course of his presentation after voicing a disclaimer that he was an "expert" on global warming as stated in an announcement of his appearance before the FIG meeting in *City Beat*.

When you think about shifts in global climate, we're also talking about shifts in the time phases that these organisms deal with. Climate, solar radiation, and temperature are the factors that are driving the timing that is important to these organisms. If you think about what the responses to environmental change these organisms go through, we can talk about climate change, habitat alterations, chemical contamination, and you can break it down into 4 categories:

1) Tolerance: generally, if the degree of the challenge is not too far out of bounds of what these organisms are capable of dealing with, they can *tolerate* the change. Generally for most organisms in this category it would amount to a small amount of change. However, there are some organisms that have broad tolerances and so can handle lots of change.

2) Most of the typical organisms have what might be termed a window and if the challenges of the environment go too far to either side of this window, the response would go in the direction of one of the next three categories. The next response would be to *disperse* to an appropriate habitat, to a novel environment, one with a more suitable temperature regime.

3) The next one, Adapt, for some of the more evolutionary responses but there are some that would respond in such a way that might be termed a non-evolutionary response or plasticity. e.g., in a warming environment they might metamorphose very early whereas in a cooling environment, they might winter over for another year.

4) The last category is pretty straightforward, extinction.

Tolerance would favor generalized organisms that can handle broad environmental changes, e.g., things like the Norway rat.

Dispersal will favor mobile organisms, e.g., butterflies.

Two different categories of Adapt one of which will favor genetic variability that requires some variability of genetic makeup in order to respond to evolutionary change. And then those organisms that have the ability for a plastic response as opposed to genetic variability.

Then one can think of the rest. Those organisms that don't fall into one of the previous categories if the change is too great: they can't tolerate, they can't disperse, and they can't adapt. Then extinction is the final result.

How does this relate to global climate change? It's likely to exacerbate current trends toward homogenization of the global biota.

We've all heard of invasive type species where they are moving across boundaries. So there has been a movement of organisms across what we term political boundaries.

The importance of time and time rates, is a simple one. The one who is the faster wins, as does the one with the better hunting ability, rate of movement, and rate of overall activity. These are simple ones because the result is direct, e.g. direct predation. Another one is time rate as in competitive interactions such as feeding frenzies.

However what is more interesting are the indirect ones such as the changes in the timing of life history stages, reproduction, development, gender, life span. These are the questions of evolutionary ecology.

Vulnerable life history can be demonstrated by nestlings or fledglings. This stage tends to be a particularly vulnerable stage in the life history of birds. If that can be minimized in terms of evolutionary time, then the loss will be minimized. In one study of a species of sparrow, 90% of fledglings did not make it through this stage of life history. Thus only 10% were making it through only to be preyed upon by house cats.

Another example is sea turtles. The movement from the nest to the sea is their most vulnerable stage. The shorter they can make the distance the greater is their prospect for success because their chance of survival is greater once they reach the water.

The next item is life history evolution meaning how organisms match their life history strategies to how they respond to change and to the habitats they're exposed to.

The subject organisms are amphibians. There is a tremendous range in the development times for amphibians. They can spend as much as three years in the larval stage (tadpoles). The spadefoot toad lives in the semi and arid areas out west. They are buried underground for most of the year. But they can



FIG Leaflets

Marvels of Capitalism, Private Enterprise, and Free Markets.

Leninsk is a region of seemingly endless and featureless fields browned by the summer drought, a sprawl of hundreds of thousands of hectares of once-lush collective farms, steppe country now all but abandoned since the fall of communism in the 1990s. That event was calamitous for the formerly thriving villages that gained their sustenance from the state farms. Today, what few farm machines remain are broken and rusted relics. There are no mechanics to repair them, and replacements are unobtainable, the villagers have no money to maintain or fuel the huge machines. So they just sit there, industrial tombstones of a former age of plenty.

At their peak, the 110,000 hectares [270,000 acres] of farmland of the Tsarev State Farm supported 36,000 sheep, 3000 milk cows, poultry, and large herds of beef cattle. Tending their fields of barley, rice, corn, wheat, and mustard plants kept more than 5000 villagers fully employed and happily prosperous. Then came the fall of communism and the economic collapse of the farm collectives. In 1992 and 1993 each family of the state farm workers was given 19 hectares [47 acres] to "own" and work. But with the distribution of free land, most of the farm machinery in working order quickly disappeared, so few of the new landowners had the means to work the land, and the new privatization laws did not permit a family to sell their acreage. Today, like the fields, the villages have grown fallow with their aging and diminishing populations mostly in their late sixties and seventies. Few young people bother to hang around.

Roy A. Gallant, *Meteorite Hunter* (2002) p. 146

From the American Friends Service Committee:

MARKET FUNDAMENTALISM: The above elements economic growth, free trade, deregulation, privatization, and the global spread of corporate power have been combined into a powerful ideology. According to this philosophy, the market can solve all problems. And nothing should interfere with the market, neither the government nor private organizations, neither religion nor family. Market principles of competition, risk and efficiency are raised to the level of laws. Those who question

these laws are considered heretics.

John Feffer, *Living in Hope* (2002) p. 12

Our use of the Northern Alliance

Moreover, the privatization that the use of mercenaries reveals augured a larger trend in the United States, as the public sector was downsized in favor of reliance on the private sector. Creating an army involves severe support costs, social taxes, medical insurance, and the like. "Outsourcing" military tasks to mercenaries is cheaper in some ways, not to mention that it distances the state from otherwise "dirty" business. Mercenaries, in sum, represent the cutting edge of a privatization trend that has become de rigeur in the United States.

Gerald Horne, *From the Barrel of a Gun* (2001) p. 27

Commencement Speech.

So I throw away my text and lean over the lectern and warn them that when lawyers place client service ahead of virtue, people die. They applaud wildly. I tell them that if they decide that their only role is to do what their clients tell them to do, they will be part of the destruction of a great nation, dying already from our stubborn refusal to look at life as more than an opportunity to get what we want. They applaud cautiously. I talk about the proliferation of handguns and the lack of political will to do anything about it. They applaud dutifully. I talk about the proliferation of abortions and the lack of political will to do anything about it. They do not applaud, but many of their parents do. I propose that both are signs of a self-indulgence that is replacing both capitalism and democracy as the nation's true ideology. Nobody applauds, because nobody thinks I am making sense. I tell them that they need to find a vision of a greater nation and then to work toward it, not only in their professional lives but in their personal lives. I tell them that the contemporary dichotomy between the public and the private quite overlooks the fact that it is our so-called private lives that teach our children what it means to live rightly and that living rightly, not using law to force others to live rightly, is the definition of the life well lived. I hear polite coughing. I am boring them.

Stephen Carter, *The Emperor of Ocean Park*, (2002) p. 582



Rationally Speaking

A monthly e-column by
Massimo Pigliucci
Department of Botany,
University of Tennessee

N. 29, October 2002
On intuition

This column can be posted for free on any appropriate web site and reprinted in hard copy by permission. If you are interested in receiving the html code or the text, please send an email (skeptic@rationallyspeaking.org). Or, you can subscribe (free) to the Rationally Speaking announcements list.

Dmitri Mendeleev is resented by high school students, and lauded among scientists for having come up with the idea that the natural elements can be arranged neatly and logically in a regular fashion, based on simple properties such as their atomic number. Mendeleev's Periodic Table is one of the best examples of synthesis in science, an idea that brought about the ability to make predictions about the discovery of new elements. What is less known is that Mendeleev had the idea in a dream—not while he was sitting at his desk thinking about the order of the universe. There are other examples of scientific discoveries made, not through the stereotypical behaviors we associate with scientists, but during dreams, walks in the park, or sudden episodes of seeing a solution that wasn't there until a moment earlier.

The role of intuition in scientific discovery has been has much maligned in favor of the importance of rationality in everyday life and human relationships. Worse, the two (intuition and rationality) have often been considered as opposites, as defining different types of mental activity, and even different kinds of people. Just think of Star Trek's Mr. Spock: the quintessential rational entity, yet completely incapable of both emotions and intuitions.

It turns out that research on what actually constitutes intuition is rapidly demolishing some old prejudices (see S. Dehaene, et al., in Science, 7 May 1997) and, in the process, forcing us to think of human beings again as creatures that have to have both intuition (and emotion) and rationality in order to function properly—so much for Mr. Spock.

First, we need to look at what one might possibly mean by "intuition." The most common interpretations of the word include the immediate understanding of something that is not obvious ("intuitive"), a hunch ("I've got this intuition"), the whole as seen by the mind at once ("an intuitive understanding of the problem"), or some kind of natural knowing independent of logical reason ("I just know it, period"). If we exclude the first, rather uninteresting, meaning, all the others have something in common, in that they refer to somehow seeing something before (or even despite) rational deliberation.

Neurobiological research on patients with damaged brains, or using functional magnetic resonance imaging of our thinking organ, show that certain areas of the brain seem to be particularly involved with intuitive thinking. Interestingly, the same areas are associated with emotions, since patients affected by damage in those areas not only lose the ability to intuit, but also suffer severe loss of emotional capabilities. This, of course, goes a long way toward explaining why popular culture has forged a link between emotions and intuition.

Where popular culture is wrong is in contrasting intuition and rationality. Research on the topic is helping to draw a picture of intuition as a bridge between subconsciously processed information and the action of conscious thought (see G. Vogel, in Science, 28 February 1998). Intuition brings the results of subconscious processing to the attention of conscious (and therefore rational) thought. Rather than being opposed to each other, intuition and rationality are strictly interdependent.

Not only does intuition provide the fuel for rational deliberation, but the relationship goes the other way too. One can think of rationality, when well used, as a sort of filter to discern good from bad intuitions: just because we have an intuition, it doesn't mean that we are right. What it does mean is that we have something on which to focus our conscious attention. It is rational thought, through a slower but more methodical analysis of the evidence, that helps us decide if our subconscious was right in the first place. It is therefore equally imbalanced to be mostly

Quote of the month:
"Intuition is often mistaken, but not altogether." - Mason Cooley (b. 1927), U.S. aphorist. City Aphorisms, Ninth Selection, New York (1992).

(Continued from page 8)

“intuitive” (i.e., ignoring that one’s first impression can be wrong), or too rational (i.e., ignoring one’s hunches as surely misguided).

Interestingly, and again contrary to popular conception, intuition is not a generic ability, i.e., there is no such thing as intuitive or non-intuitive people across the board. Rather, one’s intuitions tend to be more accurate the more one has accumulated expertise in a particular field. A chess master’s intuition at chess is better than a novice’s, but the master does not have the intuition about car problems that an experienced mechanic has, and vice versa.

This means that it is possible to improve one’s intuition by working in the same field for years, accumulating so much experience that our brain eventually tends to transfer part of the processing to the subconscious: we suddenly seem to “know” the answer, almost before we can formulate the question. This also has important and often neglected applications. Consider, for example, the common business practice of moving people “vertically” within a company as soon as they have demonstrated ability at a particular job. What the company is doing is literally to reset the knowledge base and hence intuitive abilities of the employee with every move, with the result that one is kept in a semi-permanent state of incompetence. That can’t be good for business. Think about it, the next time you are promoted, or give a promotion.

Further readings:

Serendipity, Accidental Discoveries in Science, by R.M. Roberts, but where they really accidental?.

Web links:

The neurobiology of cognition, by M.J. Nichold and W.T. Newsome. (http://www.nature.com/cgi-taf/DynaPage.taf?file=/nature/journal/v402/n6761supp/full/402c35a0_r.html)

Next month:
The US as the ultimate rogue state?

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Many thanks to Melissa Brenneman and Bob Faulkner for patiently editing and commenting on Rationally Speaking columns.

(Continued from page 6)

sense rain even before it begins. If the rain is enough to fill depressions, they will go lay eggs. The eggs hatch in one or two days and become larvae for 12 days. So their range is from 12 days to 3 years. If they pick the wrong pond, i.e., one that doesn’t last up to 12 days, the larvae dries out very quickly.

The speaker also related some of his experience during his three summers above the Arctic Circle at Tulik Lake, Alaska, as part of the Long Term Ecological Research Project. One of the key reasons to initiate this project was the paucity of long-term address questions such as global climate change. Two main environmental change pressures on the North Slope were: 1) climate, resulting in increased runoff and increased nutrient inputs and 2) development, resulting in increased fishing pressures because of the proximity to Haul Road and what were the effects on the community of these two pressures.

Environmental change and impacts on biodiversity :

In the arctic regions the greatest impact results from climate change.

In boreal forests, although climate change is almost the greatest impact, land use and nitrogen deposition are almost equal to it.

In temperate forests nitrogen deposition has the greatest impact.

In the tropical forests land use has the greatest impact.

In the savannas land use has the greatest impact while all others, carbon dioxide concentrations, nitrogen deposition, climate change are just about equal to each other and about half the impact of land use.

The balance of the presentation relied on slides to show the impact of environmental change and the vegetation over a 50-year period.

Unfortunately, because of lack of space, I have been unable to include representative questions from the Q & A period but I can say that in a subsequent conversation with the speaker he said that he enjoyed giving the talk and especially enjoyed the Q & A period.

Note: In my brief introduction of the speaker, I mentioned that he is a member of my extended family but I neglected to identify the relationship. He is my nephew.

George Maurer