

Ah, Sweet Mystery

The poet Thomas Gray, who first said "Ignorance is bliss," was on to a wonderfully powerful idea. While Gray doubtless meant "what you don't know won't hurt you," I content that what you don't know can become a happy obsession. I would expand upon this notion to say that, given (a) an inquiring mind (b) a fascinating unknown, and (c) plenty of data to work with, ignorance can become a consuming joy, even a passion. The search for truth can lead one happily down many a blind alley, and these can be delightful excursions into the unknown, even if they do not finally lead to definitive knowledge.

Now, boyhood is fraught with unknowns. But none is as fascinating as the quest for knowledge about the fair sex. To be clear, I do not refer to the eternal mysteries of how the female mind works, or how to navigate the emotional mine fields of the gently borne: these are mysteries that most of us never fully solve. No, I have in mind a much more tangible, physical, corporate set of unknowns. Boys of a certain age want to know as much as they possibly can about girls:

specifically, how they work. . .and, more to the point, how IT works.

It has been a long, long time since most of us here tonight were caught up in this wonderful world of ignorance, or felt the thrill of the chase as new information, theories or tales presented themselves. I ask you to try your hardest to recapture, for just ten minutes, the wonderful time when you knew nothing. Return with me now, to those thrilling days of yesteryear: the Great Mystery rides again!

For boys bent upon this quest, which is essentially every boy, the search for knowledge can become one of adolescence's few genuine pleasures. There is more speculation and misinformation to be sorted through than can possibly be dealt with. There are smutty jokes and books. Boys explore a happy world of myth and fiction. And boyhood brings with it an endless stream of anecdotal information - most of it utterly erroneous - that demands to be worked through.

There is the search for dependable authority. Noah Webster is of only limited usefulness on the subject, and coldly impersonal. The Boy Scout manual and old National Geographic magazines are suggestive but little better. One by one, the "good parts" of adult novels are discovered and studied. As a boy, I had a friend whose father was a celebrated ob/gyn - but the medical textbooks we found in his library were Greek to us. False prophets were a dime a dozen, each with his own small bit of disinformation to muddy the waters. Some had stumbled upon their fathers' hidden stash of erotica. Boys with sisters were generally granted a higher level of credibility.

For many, a shadowy authority figure emerged: "my older brother's friend." Older brothers, the argument goes, are obviously more experienced and worldly-wise: but most of us knew our acquaintances' older brothers too well to accept unlikely tales of their exploits.

However, an older brother's friend is someone we may not know. . .and it can be hard to doubt his expertise.

In the course of time there came those who claimed personal adventures. But this was almost all wishful thinking. While we wanted desperately to believe what we heard, king-sized doubt about these tales of precocious accomplishments gnawed at our vitals. Ultimately, there is firsthand experience: but that typically comes much later. And while it brings its own pleasures, answers many questions, and solves many mysteries, it also spells finis to the joys of the unknown.

I was fortunate to attend a boys' boarding school. So did my older brothers and, of course, their omniscient friends. And in these all-adolescent-male environments, the search for truth becomes a group obsession. Every night, when the lights are turned out, there is but a single topic being examined in whispered voices. And the same old fascinating, time-honored myths are hauled out of the closet and considered over and over again.

These timeless myths deserve to be recorded and studied. For I contend there is little that is new in this particular world of mystery, and that these are the very same myths which these very boys' great grandfathers grappled with when their lights went out. Indeed, I suggest that in the dormitories of Arnold's Rugby or the gymnasias of Athens two thousand years ago, boys were speculating over exactly the same myths when their lamps were snuffed out, as the boys of my youth. Proponents of coeducation have much to answer for.

And what are some of these timeless myths and unknowns? Let's revisit a few. I suspect they will come back to you like old friends. . .

Some of life's most important lessons come from observing the animal kingdom, and so it is with many boys' first exposure to the reproductive act. Man's

best friend teaches them a riveting lesson. . .and a very puzzling one. The long standing "connectedness" of our canine friends, one might say. . .the uniquely enduring nature of their togetherness. . .gives rise to a host of misunderstandings which are extremely difficult to reconcile with the human world. And from these mysteries sprung legions of myths about the little understood phenomenon of "locking."

For boys with inquiring minds there is plenty of anecdotal evidence that this is, indeed, the way things work. My older brother had a friend who was taken thus while dallying with a lady friend in the front seat of his automobile. They had to blow the horn until help came, whereupon they were conveyed to a hospital like lago's "beast with two backs" to be surgically separated!

What a perfectly ghastly thought? Oh, the pain and embarrassment of it all! Clearly, this did not happen on every occasion. But how could you tell when this dread lightning would strike? Was there a preventive? What was the preferred course of action when and if it did? These were deep waters, indeed. How much more wonderful to ponder this puzzle night after night than to know the infinitely less dramatic truth of the matter.

One of the most enduring myths to emerge from these hothouses of misinformation dealt with saltpeter in the food. It was a universal belief that there were one hundred pound sacks of the stuff stacked shoulder-high in the school basement - my older brother had a friend who had seen them there, while on disciplinary kitchen duty - and were it not for daily doses in our evening meal, the school would surely become a sinkhole of self-abuse or worse. At my all-male university it was held that the school actually doubled our dosage before co-educational events: had they not, no maiden attending a party weekend would have been safe.

I have since learned that these beliefs flourished in academies for the delicately nurtured, as well. A lady of my acquaintance assured me it was a commonplace that the stuff was dispensed at Vassar College in the mashed potatoes. . .and no right-thinking girl would touch them on Thursday evening if she was planning on a big weekend at Princeton, Dartmouth, or even Yale.

Myths die hard, and wherever men are quarantined and fed, the saltpeter story lives on, particularly in the military and especially on ships at sea. I'll wager it was currency in Nelson's fleet. And when it fell to me, years later, to inventory my battalion's commissary, I was puzzled to find no trace of the stuff; and too shy as a newly-minted lieutenant to question the grizzled master sergeant cooks on the matter.

From the dark mysteries of sexual depressants, it was but a short and happy leap to the great unknown of stimulants. For many years, I have been unsure of the truth surrounding aphrodisiacs, and I still am.

Speculation focused upon a mystical substance called Spanish Fly - allegedly the dried and pulverized bodies of an obscure Iberian insect more properly known as cantharides. You can even find it in a dictionary. I grew up in horse country, and we were told the stuff had been used by Arabs for centuries to bring the most reluctant mare to a state of readiness (yet another example of learning from the animal kingdom). But that the greatest care had to be taken with human use, the typical maiden requiring but a fraction of a mare's dosage. One pinch too much and there would be ghastly consequences. (Overdosing of love potions and philters is a common theme in many boys stories. . .invariably due to impatience for results; and usually with ludicrously catastrophic outcomes).

I first heard such a tale, involving a gear shift, from my older brothers' friend. . .but so did all my pals hear the same tale from their older brothers'

friends, suggesting it was only another myth going the rounds. We grew skeptical.

But these adolescent mysteries sink deep roots, and I have pursued my quest for knowledge about aphrodisiacs into adulthood - with continuing frustration. Upon reaching man's estate I set out upon a careful survey of the medical men among my friends. I have yet to find a single one who will positively state that aphrodisiacs exist. . .or that they do not. When I ask about rhino horn or ginseng they try to fob me off with limp speculations about oysters and blueberries. What rubbish! In fact, they don't have a clue. Neither do any of the chefs, dietitians or nutritionists with whom I have worked professionally. No one knows. . .but everyone seems to want to believe. No doubt, they are all clinging to the myths of their youth, too.

But wait! I finally had a breakthrough of sorts as I continued to grapple with this adolescent unknown. I was at a dinner party in Mexico City, where I met the bored and world-weary expatriate daughter of one of the world's best known physicians. She had fled to Mexico in the 60's and, since then, had drunk from every cup, as the saying goes. We exchanged pleasantries about sightseeing in Mexico, in which she took barely polite interest, until I mentioned visiting the Merced, Mexico City's mile-square marketplace where one can still find witch doctor shops selling bizarre herbs and potions. At this, she perked up and asked if I had gone there to buy my Spanish Fly! Leaning closer to me, this woman - who I would never see again and who had no earthly reason to try to impress me - confided that one of these shops, in particular, had the best stuff in all the country.

I was agog. Words cannot describe my fascination with this conversation. I was instantaneously transformed back into a marveling and gullible fourteen year old, eager to believe and teetering on the brink of discovery!

She went on to caution me that under no circumstances, however, should I buy my opera creams from this witch doctor. This seemed to me the greater non sequitur of all time, and my face must have showed my puzzlement. "Well," she asked, "How do you take your Spanish Fly?" She explained that sophisticated Mexicans all went to a fine confectioner in the Zona Rosa to buy a box of the best opera creams, which they then took to the witch doctor of their choice who surgically opened the bottom of each, inserted just the right amount of the stuff (not too much!) and then sealed the incision with a drop of melted chocolate.

To this day, I am determined to solve this boyhood mystery. For whatever it's worth, I can report that the Internet has more than 64,000 entries under Spanish Fly, suggesting a widespread interest. Fired with the zeal of my youth, I am slogging through them. The thrill of the chase is with me and, in a way, I almost hope I never do discover final truth in the matter. I'll keep you posted. . .

We could continue this walk down memory lane, revisiting the myths of our youth. Like why one sought out girls with black patent leather shoes as dancing partners. . .the relative willingness of Catholic, Jewish or French girls. . .exploits of boys whose families owned Nash automobiles. . .trying to learn how to recognize and decipher signs or signals from girls who are interested. . .debating whether nymphomania is fact or fiction (and, if fact, where you found one). These are the kinds of topics which, if thrown open to discussion among our members, would surely yield fruitful and happy discourse. But time does not permit.

Alas, there is a sad ending to this walk down memory lane. For it appears to me that these wonderful myths, which have fascinated male for millennia, are finally dying. . .and in our time, too! For what mysteries can survive in a world where all knowledge on such matters is available to any inquiring boy with

access to the Internet, where everything is told and graphically illustrated? A wooden stake has been driven through the hearts of these splendid speculations. Our grandsons will never experience the thrill of these unknowns. I am sorry for them.

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