

SCIENCE

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EDITORIAL

The Perversity of Inanimate Objects

Science. Dr. Noitall, you are one of the great authorities in the world on priority setting, the man who urged Eve not to eat the apple, the man who thought it was high priority for Columbus to discover the New World, the man who told Santa to use Rudolph as his sleigh leader....

Noitall. A vast understatement of my true worth.

Science. The U.S. Congress and scientists do not always agree on priorities in research. How would you improve the record of scientists getting their funding approved?

Noitall. The scientists are absolutely idiotic in their list of priorities. They would like to cure cancer and infectious diseases, study superconductivity, and create better polymers and safer fertilizers. The public is totally uninterested in those problems.

Science. But all of those studies will ultimately benefit the public.

Noitall. "Ultimately" is the crucial word. Most citizens have far more immediate concerns, and they are mostly worried about the perversity of inanimate objects.

Science. What in the world are you talking about? We scientists don't believe in extra-sensory perception, precognition, or the souls of inanimate objects.

Noitall. That is exactly your problem. The public has ample evidence that inanimate objects are deliberately making life difficult for *Homo sapiens*, and scientists are routinely ignoring this enormous problem.

Science. Could you give me some examples?

Noitall. The top of a maple syrup jar always arranges to stick just when the hot waffle gets on the table. Car keys prefer to be on the inside of cars with four locked doors. Umbrellas have the ability to become invisible whenever you start to leave the restaurant.

Science. I'm afraid, Dr. Noitall, you do not have any understanding of statistics. Your examples do not include a data base to show that there is any precognition associated with the events you are talking about.

Noitall. No one event by itself can prove the hypothesis, but the accumulation of events provides overwhelming evidence. Christmas tree lights deliberately tangle themselves when you put them in the box, dropped coins always roll to the most inaccessible place under the couch, fire alarms always go off when you are taking a shower, clothes washers always convert an even number of socks into an odd number of socks. The unwillingness of scientists to face these real problems convinces ordinary people that scientists are an ivory-tower group that is not responding to real needs.

Science. Science is not impressed with a conglomeration of data. It likes carefully constructed analysis of each problem.

Noitall. Scientists believe the second law of thermodynamics, even though it has no absolute proof. The accumulation of experience showing that a perpetual motion machine is not possible is the basis of scientists' belief in the second law of thermodynamics. Why should the accumulation of evidence for the perversity of inanimate objects not be equally convincing?

Science. How many different objects show such behavior?

Noitall. The phone always rings just as you are about to go to the meeting. The queue that you step into is always the slowest. Word processors inject extra words words in the manuscript that is about to go off to the journal. Ties attract soup. The spectrophotometer deliberately fails in the middle of the decisive kinetic experiment. How many examples do you need? These problems are crying out for solution, and we are spending money on silly items like continuing to develop high-speed computers and curing tuberculosis.

Science. Do you think scientists will change their priorities?

Noitall. Scientists have the naïve idea that logic rules the world. Wait until they see whether the law of probability is more powerful than the law of the U.S. Congress. The senator from state X will propose an institute in the state of X to study why sidewalk curbs rise up to stub toes, and the congressperson from state Y will suggest a foundation in the state of Y to investigate why door frames deliberately bump heads. Laws of nature aren't valid until they get a majority vote of the Congress.

Daniel E. Koshland Jr.