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EDITORIAL

The Time Traveler

Science. Dr. Noitall, you are one of the great inventors of all time—the man who discovered the antigravity device, the man who devised the engine that gets 50 miles per gallon of vinegar, the man who can converse with other galaxies.

Noitall. A vast understatement of my true worth.

Science. What new inventions have you made recently?

Noitall. A new time machine that allows me to transport people back to any previous era. Many people say, “I’d like to go back to the good old days, like the 1800’s.”

Science. Fantastic. How does it work?

Noitall. Top secret—but based on the principle that if you go westward with the speed of light, you keep turning back the clock until you return before you’ve started.

Science. And what success have you obtained so far?

Noitall. The device is a fantastic success, but no tourists want to use it.

Science. What are you trying to achieve?

Noitall. I am trying to get volunteers to go back to a previous era when life was without current problems—no pollution, no overcrowding, no pesticides, no smog.

Science. And why no volunteers?

Noitall. As you know, I am a man hampered by my strict integrity. I would sacrifice my mother-in-law rather than tell a lie.

Science. And what truth must you tell that ruins your offer to potential volunteers?

Noitall. I have to explain that they must accept all of the previous era—the open spaces, the lack of automobile pollution, and so on, but also the absence of anesthesia, the absence of wonder drugs, a life expectancy of 44 years instead of 74, one-third of all women dying in childbirth, no television, no frozen foods...

Science. But what about those “science is ruining the world” types? They should be anxious to get back to the golden days of the past.

Noitall. That’s what has hurt me the most. They apparently haven’t understood what they are saying. Given the chance to go back in time, they prefer the here and now. I even plead that the ozone hole was much smaller then.

Science. What about a less drastic offer—just a few years back?

Noitall. They won’t even go back a few years. They cite recent inventions like portable telephones, jet travel, microsurgery, better computers, and more efficient cars. Even a few years ago, we lived less well than we do now.

Science. So you have made an invention no one wants to use.

Noitall. It’s a shame. Fortunately, I have one hope: a new regulatory law that will require everyone to spend some time in the 18th century.

Science. Why would Congress ever pass a law like that?

Noitall. We will call it an entitlement. Congress will never fail to enact an entitlement. Free travel at government expense is certain to be popular.

Science. And will that cure the “science is awful” crowd?

Noitall. Of course not. The gene for unbridled dedication to a lost cause will always overwhelm the pure logic genes.

Science. But requiring people to live in the 18th century just to prove a point seems too expensive. Can you make them satisfied in any other way?

Noitall. In fact, I am working on some very good computer-designed drugs. One called “factsium” would give you a great drug-induced “high” every time you absorbed an unpleasant fact. If you can’t travel to cure your delusions, drug-induced hallucinations may be the next best thing.

Science. Would people get “hooked on facts” and become drug abuse victims?

Noitall. We are aware of that potential problem. We have a corrective drug that we call the “forest from the treesium.” We prescribe it for poor souls who can’t control their fascination for isolated facts.

Daniel E. Koshland Jr.