

“It’s Elementary My Dear Watson”:
The Tensions between Professional and Amateur Knowledge
February 28, 2016
UCV

Meditation:

Ninety years ago last week, the Czech writer Karel Capek published a short article entitled “About Relativism” for a mass circulation newspaper. At first he feigned an effort to explain Einstein’s theory of relativity to his readers. Confessing that he was as stumped about this as everyone else, he changed tack and revealed the true purpose of the essay: and it was about cognition, about how we come to know things, saying that “to explore experience as totally as possible—that’s not relativism but thoroughness. *Relations*: that’s the important word here,” he wrote. “If we are concerned about the true relations of real things and real people, nothing [can be] left just to our arbitrary will...or to our fraction of the truth. The only drawback is that life becomes incredibly difficult....For this reason many people demand that truth should be delivered to them complete and exclusive. They claim that this statement [or that] is the absolute and sole truth, whereas everything else is false and fraudulent....One of the worst confusions of this age is that it mixes up cognitive activity with ideological belligerence....The only alternative to not being a relativist is to be a monomaniac.”

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The Tensions between Professional and Amateur Knowledge

A sermon by Rev. Steven Epperson

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For a while now, my partner and I have discovered the pleasure of watching serialized television programs on a couple of website platforms. We’d long heard that this a golden age for the small screen, and I’m not embarrassed to say that I’ve enjoyed checking out and curling up on the couch to watch *Borgen*, *Friday Night Lights*, *The Bridge*, *Occupied* and *Parade’s End*—shows about detectives as well: *Case Histories*, *Sherlock*, and *Father Brown*. And there’s been something that’s struck me about the latter genre—crime and detective shows—and that’s how often the hero is not a member of the professional guild of law enforcement. He or she is an outsider, an “amateur,” whose status, body of knowledge and methods of detection are often dismissed, derided and in conflict with the “professionals.”

That’s got me thinking both about the genre of detective fiction; and further, it’s got me thinking about the ways we come to know things and how it is that we have confidence in the things we do know or believe to be true and false. And what happens when what we know, or believe to be true, is at odds with the professionals, and what they claim to know because of their expertise?

Now, I do want to say that there are times when I am absolutely in awe of professionals, what they have discovered and know to be the case. And as people who love to learn, understand and appreciate the world in all its complexity, don’t we feel a sense of respect that there are

people out there and among us who've acquired mastery sufficient to know and teach so many things; respect and reverence even for the worlds they have opened up for us?

On the other hand, there are other less inspiring stories where professionals unfortunately keep getting enmeshed in thickets of conflicts of interest that corrupt relationships and trust: experts in the USDA and Health Canada approved Vioxx, an arthritis and pain medication that ended up killing tens of thousands of people in the US and Canada before it was removed from the market. The vaunted engineering corps of Volkswagen cheated emissions tests by installing defeat software in 11 million diesel cars. Respected psychologists seconded to the US Defense Department instructed CIA operatives in how to torture terror suspects; acclaimed constitutional lawyers signed off that it was legal. Environmental professionals in Michigan told the people of Flint their water was safe to drink. Knowledge elites, from pulpits to Parliaments, told us World War I was a Crusade for Christian civilization and the war to end all wars—the result was millions of dead, empty churches, ruinous financial speculation, and nihilism. Public health officials, religious and political leaders, with all their expertise, were successful in imposing Prohibition in US—and we know how well that worked out. And in Canada, it was the flawed presumption of a host of civilizing experts that contributed to our residential schools disaster.

We find ourselves frequently placed in a quandary by competing claims about truth, facts, data, and ideologies between professional experts and well-thought-out, homegrown, experiential ways of knowing. As a matter of fact, and we know this all-too-well, experts disagree among themselves; they issue what seems to be a never ending stream of conflicting studies. Take diet for example: media accounts of the latest scientific findings seem to overthrow what previous studies claimed to be healthy: butter's bad, no it's good, salt's out, no we need it. And what do

we do when we find out that some science and medical journals have published articles ghost written by pharmaceutical and energy companies—respected professionals just sign off on them though they didn't do the research or even write the articles. And this scandal persists.

Close up, what happens when you know a family whose loved one is experiencing adverse reactions to a medication—the family knows because they see cause and effect by observation and lived experience. They bring this information to a medical team thinking they're being helpful, only to be dismissed because, they're told: "this isn't possible; that can't be an effect of the drug." But the symptoms and suffering persist. The drug is finally withdrawn, and—you guessed it—the adverse symptoms go away.

These kinds of things don't happen all the time, fortunately. If they did, all would be a riot and anarchy of never ending, ruinous knowledge claims and misery. But it's bad enough, it happens often enough, that public trust in the expertise of knowledge professionals leaks away like air from a punctured balloon—with the hole getting bigger. One result is that we do our own research on the internet for sources of information. We hope to find a trusted second opinion, alternative treatments, data and reasoned arguments to bolster our opinions and knowledge about politics, the environment, privacy, home care, diet—life?! And with these facts and studies and arguments in hand, have you had the experience of being dismissed because you're told "oh, that's just stuff you got off the internet," and you're not an expert with degrees and membership in professional guilds?

Which brings me back to some of the detective shows I've been watching. There's this theme that crops up in many of them: the rumpled trench coated outsider, the observant and knowledgeable amateur savant, the parish priest with unusual insights into human nature gained

from decades in the confessional. And time and again, they run afoul of law enforcement pros who spurn the insights and methods of the so-called amateur because they're unconventional; they're not by the book; they're not members of the professional brotherhood.

All of this was started back in 1841 by Edgar Allan Poe and the creation of the amateur sleuth C. Auguste Dupin. The word “detective” hadn't even yet been created. Dupin solves unfathomable crimes due to his creative insights and powers of “ratiocination”—his independent powers of thinking. His unfettered imagination, his uncanny knowledge and his success in solving crimes are contrasted by Poe with the plodding cluelessness and opposition from the conventional police force. Poe's character, themes and plot devices subsequently laid the groundwork for fictitious detectives to come from Sherlock Holmes, to Father Brown to Easy Rawlings and a host of others.

The date and context for the premiere of Dupin in *The Murders in the Rue Morgue* are significant, as are the subsequent heroes of this genre of detective fiction. 19th century Europe and North America were undergoing massive, irrevocable change. Whether thrown off their land, or seeking a better life and wages, people were exchanging the known verities, rhythms and lifestyles of rural towns and villages for urban life. But at a steep price: for the local, the traditional, the known gave way to the anonymity and stress of industrial, congested, dangerous and unsanitary cities. Power exercised by remote and unseen malign forces seemingly determined everybody's lives.

The village constable, who knew everyone and their quirks and foibles, was replaced by a uniformed police force set apart from the population, members of their own guild, observing their own conventions of law enforcement, and who, because they often lived elsewhere in the

city, didn't know you or your neighbours. They operated according to "the book," whatever that was, and in spite, or because of their professional standards and bureaucratic, conventional thinking, they seemed incapable of effectively fighting real criminals either of the organized variety or the frighteningly singular, random, malignant and irrational ones.

No wonder readers avidly devoured the exploits of so-called amateur sleuths. Here was an individual outside the system who, in a neat narrative arc, penetrated mysterious criminal syndicates, unmasked nefarious plots, outwitted the most devious malefactor, disclosed corruption in high places, and showed up the police as a bunch of nincompoops to boot. It was comforting to imagine that there was someone out there who could embody the virtues and flaws of the individual, draw on native abilities, talents, experience and gifts of intellect and imagination to triumph—and bring order where there was chaos, meaning where there was senselessness.

Two things I want to underline: first, is that we're brought by the authors into the personal lives of the amateur detectives—we see they're either messy housekeepers, or drug addicts, or physically unremarkable; they're war haunted veterans, bad parents, aging spinsters and liable to extreme states of emotion, insight and creative thinking. In other words, they're versions of us—extreme perhaps, but recognizable all the same; they have a face; they represent our virtues and our vices, and still, or perhaps because of all of that, they can ferret out the truth in spite of their flaws and all the obstacles thrown at them.

There's something else to remark on: and that's reluctant *cooperation*. For all their mutual antagonism, Holmes draws on information and resources that Lestrade, though grudgingly and sometimes by accident, shares from time to time with the sleuth of Baker Street.

And over time, each comes to an appreciation of the other's flawed gifts. Inspectors Valentine and Sullivan deplore Father Brown's constant meddling in their investigations; they don't share the Catholic priest's moral code; but again, over time, they come to respect Father Brown's unorthodox methods and insights. And crucially, both Father Brown and the Police Inspectors, just like Holmes and Lestrade and other odd couples in this genre, in spite of their exasperation, share information, compare notes, and work together.

This convention of grudging cooperation, knowledge exchange and growing respect is a common thread in the archetypal relationship between the amateur detective and the professional policeman, a convention first laid out in the groundbreaking fictions of Poe back in the 1840s. The key thing here is that neither the professional nor the amateur make the mistake of dismissing the other as a *person*; as an individual possessing a unique perspective with lived experience, and *mutually* advantageous kinds of knowledge. After all, they both want to solve the crime. It's just that they have different ways and means to achieve it. And each can gain and benefit from the other.

There's an *epistemic humility* at work in this genre of detective fiction; humility about what we can know, and a rough and ready, reluctant, but necessary, cooperation between the amateur and the professional when confronted with the complexity of human behaviour and the myriad, complicated nature of life and fact. This is what Karel Capek was talking about in the quote I shared with you in the meditation before this sermon. "To explore experience as totally as possible—that's not relativism but thoroughness," Capek wrote. "*Relations*: that's the important word here," he wrote. "If we are concerned about the true relations of real things and real people, nothing [can be] left just to our arbitrary will...or [to] our fraction of the truth."

Now, please look at the illustrations on the cover of this week's order of service. Above, is a cartoon created by the great Chilean artist Fernando Krahn; I've carried this with me for over thirty years and four different working professions: An expert is lost in thought; his abstract, perhaps utopian, theories encapsulated in a balloon. His back is turned away from a group of people who, looking at "the thinker" and his formulas, are running away for their lives.

Below, is a photo of the *Makoto Floating School* in the Lagoon of Lagos, Nigeria. For nearly a century, poor families working in the fishing industry have created ad hoc, over-time and without planning or permission, a thriving community of nearly a 100,000 whose houses, businesses and places of worship are built on stilts and barges using found materials and constructed by untrained, ingenious local artisans. As it grew, the lagoon became divided into a series of informal canals, through which canoes, conveying families and goods and services, are expertly manoeuvred. The people of Makoto have adapted their lives completely to surviving on the water.

Then, in 2010, came the experts, officials and developers. They regarded Makoto as an eye-sore and an obstacle to developing a potentially lucrative waterfront of luxury condos, hotels and commerce. Their decision was announced: in 72 hours a process of forcible eviction was to begin. 3000 residents were the first victims—Makoto was on the verge of complete demolition. Then something happened. A young architect named Kunle Adeyemi, began asking questions about the sustainability of the community. He looked closely at community design solutions, indigenous building techniques, and the lived experience of residents. He met with and began intensive consultations with local carpenters, community leaders and families.

The result was a joint decision to build a floating, multi-purpose community schoolhouse adapted to tidal changes and varying water levels. Local workers were hired to build the structure on floating barrels and locally sourced timber—and the whole community pitched in and have come to *own* this building. School children gather and recess on the first floor and ascend to the classrooms above. When school's out, it's used as a community hall, market platform and a place for fishermen to mend their nets.

The *Makoto Floating School* has gone on to win international renown, architectural awards, a “pin” on Google maps, community pride and government recognition. In fact, it's contributed to saving the whole community from being destroyed.

It didn't have to be this way. Mr Adeyemi could have had a perfectly conventional career in West Africa; the residents of Makoto could have been evicted, and the waterfront could have ended up without its city on stilts in the Lagoon and with luxury condos, hotels and boutiques. Instead, they took a different path in developing their waterfront than we have in Vancouver. And I think they're much better off, more interesting, complex, diverse and humane as a result.

“*Relations*: that's the important word here,” wrote Capek ninety years ago: co-operation, the mutual exchange of skills and knowledge crossing back and forth between the domains of the professional and the so-called amateur; the alternative is self-defeating, conventionally imposed solitudes.

A final illustration: it's in the back of our pews—those bookmarks listing our *Principles and Sources*. In order to understand, express and achieve our beliefs and values as Unitarians, note that our living religious tradition draws upon multiple sources of knowledge and skills for authoritatively grounding and substantiating our faith and practice. Here there is no single

source for our ways of knowing and being; no privileging of one means, one way, one path over another. There's a recognition, from our history, expertise and lived experience, just how important plural sources of knowing and perceiving are for our journey along the boundary of the known and the unknown.

Coming to the close of these remarks, I know that I have only scratched the surface of what is a complicated and important topic. As well, I want you to know how much I benefit everyday from the generous ways we exchange ideas, constructive criticism, and insights—the ways we mutually minister to each other.

What I hope is that we will go from here more humble about what we can know, humble, too, about the tools we use to arrive at knowledge; more appreciative, of our respective expertise, our hard-won knowledge and skills—professional and amateur; schooled and experiential. And above all, I hope we will go from here dedicated to being even more cooperative, more relational in our efforts to know and act for our own and for the common good.