

View From the Rear Pew – June 4th

My favourite newspaper is the Globe and Mail. I particularly like the daily essays at the back of the Life and Arts section. A few weeks ago, one essayist noted that upon reaching the age of sixty- three years (my age), a big revelation was that she was no longer getting any smarter and needed to concentrate her efforts on not becoming any more stupid. This life observation struck a chord with me.

I am having a difficult time pinpointing when my intelligence peaked. Was it in 1961 when my mother helped me to memorize the capital cities of all 51 American states? (e.g. the capital city of South Dakota is Pierre – just don't ask me why.) Maybe it was in 1967 when I wrote my Saskatchewan grade XII Departmental exams including both French and Latin finals on the very same day? (I had memorized the English translation of likely passages from Vergil and spent most of my exam time making certain that my translation didn't extend past the Latin passage.) Or was it when I completed my Master's degree in Health Services Administration in 1977 despite my shaky grasp of statistics and statistical analysis? A good guess would also be 1992 when I assembled a complete Ikea dining room suite, (although, come to think of it, my wife did most of the work).

Don't get me wrong. I was never a likely candidate for membership in MENSA. However, what is now beyond dispute is that I am in a state of post retirement mental decline.

What can one do to arrest a slow decline into stupidity? The essayist in the Globe and Mail reported that she subscribes to something called “ the Times Literary Supplement “ and diligently reads all the articles no matter how weird or obtuse they might be. My mother does the daily crossword puzzles in the Leader Post and watches the television game show Jeopardy. My wife does SUDOKU and uses her encyclopedic memory to track my many failings as her life partner and household handyman. Some older people enroll in university or community college to take courses in calculus, Greek literature or dishwasher repair. I even heard of one enlightened senior who set out to read the entire Encyclopedia Britannica but had a hard time getting past ‘ Accounting ’ because it was so boring.

What to do? I have started to visit the mysteries section at our local public library with a focus on such British mystery writers as Ian Rankin and Quintin Jardine. I am normally a reader of history books and historical novels, so this has been quite a switch for me.

Mystery books keep you on your toes as the plot proceeds, the case is investigated and interesting clues and facts unfold. For the sake of keeping my mind supple, I consciously refrain from skipping forward to the last 3 pages of these “who dunnits”, although sometimes the suspense keeps me up reading long past my normal bedtime of 9:30 p.m. You certainly don't get the same zing from history books as you pretty well know which side won World War II before you even turn the first page. I like the British mysteries best because they are so intellectual (at least to me) with most of the action taking place in pubs or country houses with lots of eating, drinking, smoking and cynical, snide commentary (sort of like attending our church women's book club except for the smoking). There isn't much sex (I don't think that the British believe in it) or violence (unless the villain happens to be from Europe or a former member of the

SAS). Instead, there is a lot of curry takeout, suspect interviews, stake-outs, damp weather and bad tempered Chief Constables. All in all, British detective mysteries give you a lot to think about. So far all the mysteries that I have read have been set in Scotland with lots of unusual words, phrases and allusions mostly about how much the Scots despise the English, admire the Americans, and spend a lot of time drinking whisky, harvesting kelp and eating deep fried Mars bars. You see, British mysteries, while not necessarily increasing my I.Q., are certainly arresting my decline into senility, making me sensitive to the subtleties of other cultures and teaching me how to track down the criminal element swarming around the Firth of Tay.

Audrey has not appreciated my clever strategy to keep my brain sharp nor yet detected the amazing leveling out of my post retirement mental decline. While she keeps handing me brochures on University of Alberta extension courses and suggests that I join a mall walking club, I still prefer sharing a comfortable armchair with Detective Inspector Rebus and “Tooth and Nail”, “Knots and Crosses”, and “Death by Mars Bar”.