

If Leonardo Was Alive Today (and Looking for a Job)

It had long since come to my attention that people of accomplishment rarely sat back and let things happen to them. They went out and happened to things.

Leonardo da Vinci

In October 2007, my wife and I spent two absolutely delightful weeks in Italy. I had been invited to speak about viruses (no one ever asks me to speak about baseball, women, or international relations, the subjects on which I have real expertise), so we decided to take this opportunity and make a vacation of it. We flew from Denver to Milan and then drove to Lake Maggiore for a few days, mostly sleeping, eating, and drinking some nice wines. From there, we drove to Brescia to present the seminar and the next day we traveled by train to Florence. As do all reasonable (and some unreasonable) tourists visiting Florence, we went to the most well known sites and did some walking, eating, and drinking of nice wines. Having longed to see Florence for many years but never having been there, we were appropriately fascinated by the history, paintings, sculptures, galleries, museums, and much more; a fantastic city. Among other remarkable pieces of art, Leonardo di ser Piero da Vinci's (ie, Leonardo da Vinci) paintings and statues and Michelangelo di Lodovico Buonarroti Simoni's (ie, Michelangelo) statue of "David" were remarkable to behold, indeed astonishing. From Florence we drove to San Gimignano. I must note that Italian drivers are very friendly. As we drove at the speed limit, each car that passed our rented Alpha Romeo waved to us, although the Italian tradition seems to be with a single finger, rather than with the entire hand. Being from New York City, I speak enough manual Italian to have managed to communicate.

We spent a few days in San Gimignano, wandering the streets of that very old, walled city, eating, drinking some nice wines, and trying to locate a copy of the International Herald Tribune (looking for baseball scores and hoping there was no news about George Bush; we were, after all, on vacation). Then to Rome, to re-visit that ancient, if somewhat squalid, city (my definition of a "city": a place with too many residents, hideous traffic and parking problems, wonderful restaurants, pollution, noise,

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and filth, but with a newspaper I can understand; I am able to read many languages but I do not understand them), and saw at least some of Rome's remarkable sites. We had dinner (and some nice wines) with long-time and wonderful friends and fellow arbovirologists but, unfortunately, soon had to return home.

Italy is an extraordinarily beautiful country with fascinating people, charming and not-so-charming regional variations, an immaculate countryside, dirty large and clean small cities, panache, an elegant sense of esthetics, excellent foods prepared and presented excellently, annoyingly noisy motorcycles, narrow streets, some nice wines, unbelievable art, and very few men (at least all I noticed were women), plus thousands of people in the religion business (who do not seem to have "given up worldly goods"). We definitely would like to return there. I can tell you one thing: it doesn't take a fascist to get the trains running on schedule.

Although I seem to have bad luck with weather when I am in Europe or the weather there is just poor and depressing most of the time, the weather was tolerable throughout this trip. Nonetheless, we were happy to return home, where the sky is blue, newspapers are in a recognizable variant of English, and California wines are easily available.

I cannot resist commenting that translated announcements on airplanes and trains are terrible, in all countries. The intent of making an announcement of any kind is to tell others what you want to tell them. There really is no reason to make an announcement that is indistinct or otherwise unclear. In any case, most of these announcements (and those in most public areas) are irrelevant, even if you can understand them ("Passengers must know that they may not take on board very large guns, more than 1000 liters of wine, or uncaged gorillas"; "Do not get off the train until it stops"; "You must have a ticket before you board the train"; "The previous stop was San Ignoramus").

On this trip many thoughts came to us, which is a principal purpose of vacations. For one, we have a better under-

standing of suicide bombers who fly planes into buildings. These are people who have eaten so-called food on airplanes and, having decided not to do it again on a return trip, just kill themselves; perfectly understandable, but it would be better if they did not kill others along with themselves.

For another, we wondered why the United States of America does not begin to outsource (ie, subcontract services from an outside supplier) the production of children. We have outsourced so many services here that one more should not be a controversial issue. Certainly there will be some who would object to this, who want to do this themselves, but those who would try outsourcing might get a great deal more work done. I would suggest Iran, India, or China as the supplier. The advantages of such a plan is that our population would increase, theirs would decrease, or at least not rise at the current rate, and war between us would be out of the question. Anyway, having your own children makes you no more a parent than being in a repair shop makes you a mechanic or being in a Church makes you a Christian, so why not? Just a thought.

Too few hours of sleep causes a sort of numbness, rather like the feeling one has during the prodrome of plague. Day and night seem the same, food (or whatever that was) is eaten mechanically, and the mind wanders. In such a travel state we wondered what Leonardo da Vinci would be doing were he born in 1985 or so; to simplify the idea, let us say in the United States.

Sculptor, painter, artist: If he wanted to be a sculptor, painter, or artist, Leonardo would need financial support, which is difficult to find these days anywhere, and it is therefore unlikely that he would be removing the excess marble from large chunks of that stuff to reveal the statues inside, which is one of the activities that made him famous. It also is improbable that he would demean himself sufficiently to apply for a support grant, given that the proposal would have to be reviewed by a group of his peers. How would anyone assemble a group of Leonardo's "peers"? As Albert Einstein said, "I love the higher values of science, yet I find it humiliating to have to struggle to make a scientific career." I presume Leonardo would have felt much the same way.

Teacher: Perhaps he would want to teach. But how could he teach what he was inherently (plus a great deal of work) able to do? Teach whom? He could be a space engineer or an architect, but he would be required first to obtain a de-

gree from one of the top schools and then to qualify for a license to allow him to practice, perhaps, by law to serve an apprenticeship; how embarrassing for him and for us.

Anatomist: That field would be easiest to enter if he had a medical degree, which entails at least 3 years of medical school plus practical work. Then there are the Animal Care and Use Committees and Human Use Committees to convince. [Note that there are no Human Care Committees.]

Mathematician: Where? Study in a university? I do not know how well he would do on the Scholastic Aptitude Test, which is given to most college hopefuls here in order to test what they already know and how well they can learn. He might get the highest grade or he might devise novel answers to standard questions, answers other than what are expected, and then receive a poor score. Mathematicians can do what they like to do almost anywhere they want to do it, even in the basement of their parents' homes—and they need no license. From the paintings and drawing we see, Leonardo had a great deal of hair, and he might be mistaken for a hippie and a weird one at that – living in his parents' basement, listening to hip-hop or Gustav Mahler, and filling sheets of paper with formulas calculating the exact moment when the ecosystem will collapse. However, most people probably would see him as harmless.

Sports: Of course, if he wanted to make a great deal of money he could enter the field of sports because it is athletes who make the really big money. Although there seems to be no correlation between athletic ability and education, as clever and insightful as Leonardo likely would be, he would quickly determine how to improve games of sport. For example, he might take European football and make it a more difficult game, more high scoring, less boring. First, it would need to change the shape of the field from a rectangle to an irregularly shaped area, with a diamond-shaped area somewhere on it, perhaps near the goal. The ball might be changed to something less like a balloon, perhaps one stuffed with yarn or wool and sewn together. Next would be to allow the players to hit the ball with a stick. Then he would undoubtedly suggest rules that (a) no one takes off his (or her) shirt while on the field, (b) no one should embarrass the opposing team by running around the field looking like someone who thinks they are on television, and (c) people who want to look like Yanni should not be allowed on the field. He might even suggest that alcohol be banned two hours before and during games, but that might lead to no one attending.

If these modifications were to be accepted, more changes surely would follow, such as having even more complex rules.

Inventor: Certainly a good possibility. The problem is, everything useful already has been invented, is made of plastic, and is disposable. Anyway, who would need his inventions: the helicopter, tank, calculator, ships with double hulls, and applications of solar power? He might outline a theory of plate tectonics, but no one would understand it or pay much attention, the news these days being focused on more important events, such as Angelina Jolie's pregnancies and adoptions, whether the Uganda Cranes' David Obua will play for Dinamo Zagreb, whether George Bush is ambilevous (you will just have to check a dictionary), and whether the latest earthquake in Greece was a 6.5 or a 6.6.

Musician: Perhaps, but to support himself he would have to write or play modern pseudomusic, and play at weddings, bar mitzvahs, and fairs, and his music would have to be popular, else he would starve to death.

General science: A likely field for Leonardo. Still, there would be the inevitable schools to attend and degrees to obtain, thesis defenses, grant proposals (again), committees on which to sit, administrators to pretend to admire, parking space assignments to request, papers to publish, and perhaps classes to teach, bores to tolerate, and traveling to symposia to bear – but which area of science?

Molecular biology: This can be eliminated rather quickly, I think. Leonardo would be awestruck by the results but not the tediousness. Although a procrastinator, he was not a patient person.

Astronomy: Excellent possibility. This might be of great fascination for him but, again, there would be the degrees to obtain and the credentialing necessary before any administrator would allow him access to as expensive a piece of equipment as a modern telescope. Would you trust Leonardo with a € 20 million instrument?

Given that Leonardo was a polymath, perhaps the most intelligent person who ever lived, it is probable that no one

field would satisfy him, today or at any time. That alone creates a problem. People who are of exceedingly high intelligence usually are impatient, may bounce from this to that subject and project, and do not tolerate those who would stand in their way. This is a good thing, as standing in the way of a good idea is a bad idea.

Modern world or not, Leonardo would present to us many useful and beautiful ideas. He probably would easily solve problems caused by our dependence on oil and other extractive industries, as he would solve traffic, global climate change, and much else that plagues us; he would not have a cell phone or send text messages. Thus, after having gone through local committees, regional committees, and national committees, his ideas would be rejected on the basis of cost or because a group of his non-peers would consider his ideas unworkable.

The "Codex Leicester," the only major scientific work of Leonardo's that is owned privately is owned by Bill Gates. Perhaps Leonardo could ask Gates for a job. There is no telling what the two of them, working together, could devise, and Leonardo might get back his book.

If none of these works out, Leonardo could get a haircut and a shave, pick out a nice jacket (earth tone slacks and expensive Italian shoes) and find work as an accountant. Okay, we might not have "David," "Mona Lisa," "The Last Supper," "Virgin of the Rocks" or other paintings or sculptures of his, we might not know as much about anatomy, science, mathematics, engineering, botany or other areas of human interest but the world could always use another good accountant.

Suggested readings

Leonardo da Vinci. Available from: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Leonardo_da_Vinci. Accessed: April 14, 2009.

Clark K. *Leonardo da Vinci: revised edition*. Dublin, Ireland: Penguin Ireland; 1989.

Gelb ML. *How to think like Leonardo da Vinci: seven steps to genius every day*. New York, NY: Random House, Inc; 1998 [If this helps you think like Leonardo, please let me know].