Planting a Seed of Doubt

Skeptics should forego any thought of convincing the unconvinced that we hold the torch of truth illuminating the darkness. A more modest, realistic, and achievable goal is to encourage the idea that one may be mistaken. Doubt is humbling and constructive; it leads to rational thought in weighing alternatives and fully reexamining options, and it opens unlimited vistas.

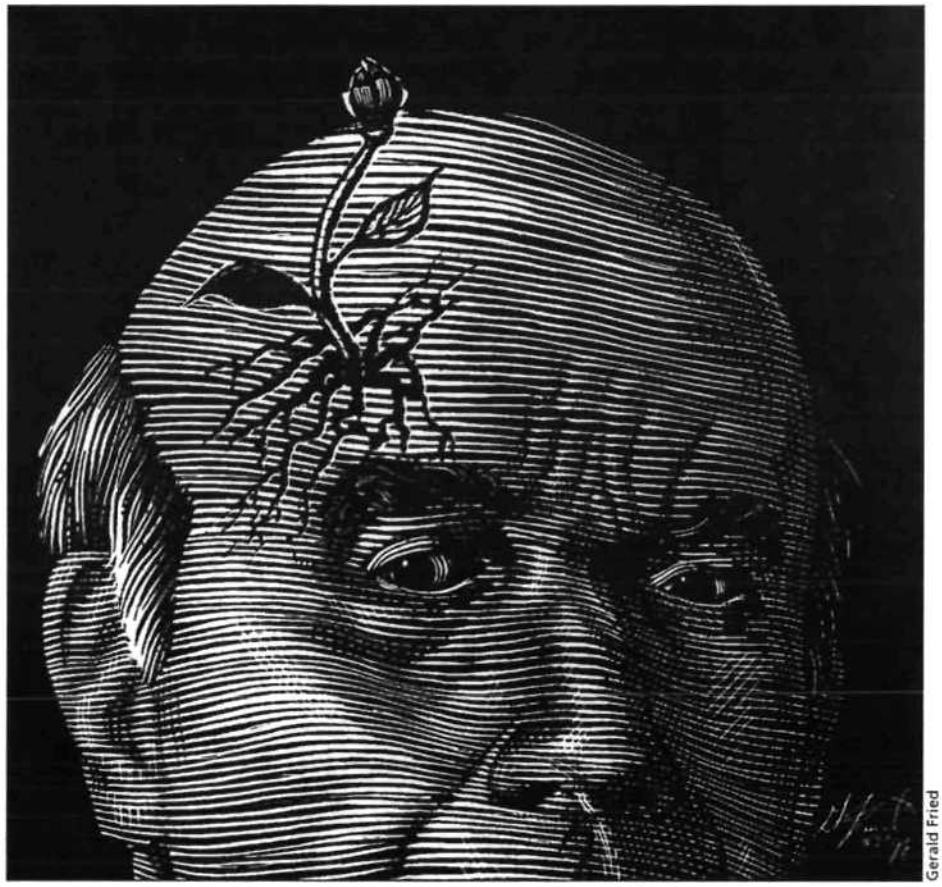
ELIE A. SHNEOUR

Theodore Newton Vail (1845–1920) was twice president of the pioneering U.S. Telephone company, as the Bell Telephone Company (1878–1887) and again as the American Telephone and Telegraph Company (1907–1919). The story of his life and accomplishments is an extraordinary one, and not relevant to this essay, with but one exception. During his early tenure as president of the telephone company, Vail assembled his management staff to analyze and answer one central question: *What is our business?*[1]

It would seem pretty obvious that the business of a telephone company is communication by telephone. But not for Vail. In fact, answering that kind of a question is perhaps one of the most difficult issues an organization has to ponder, and the right answer to it is far from obvious. Vail's answer was crucial, and its implementation ensured the survival and prosperity of a major American firm for more than three quarters of a century.

Vail's answer to the question "What is our business?" was *"Our business is service."* Although that answer becomes self-evident as soon as it is uttered, it is in its implementation that its importance is truly acknowledged. When Vail articulated it, the U.S. telephone system was already an anomaly: All telephone companies worldwide were generally nationalized because they were monopolies. And AT&T, like them, was at considerable risk of being nationalized in its turn.

The second part of the answer is more subtle than the first. In order to stay in private hands, the telephone company had to be assured of political support. And ultimately that support had to come from individuals and their communities. In order to achieve that goal, Vail undertook to install telephone lines in all areas, including isolated rural communities, which at the time made no immediate economic sense. But it was an immense service that generated exceptional customer satisfaction. And all of Vail's employees were constantly admonished to emphasize service above all.



Gerald Fried

The third part of conceptual implementation was to recognize that telephone service was as yet relatively primitive, and had a long way to go, needing extensive and sustained improvements. This required emphasis on research and technology, whose flagship became the Bell Telephone Laboratories, the fountainhead of many major inventions that have transformed our lives, including the transistor. Several of these accomplishments, however, are little known to the general public but are of at least equal importance to the invention of the transistor.

In 1931, for example, Bell Telephone Laboratories hired a young M.I.T. graduate, Karl Jansky, and assigned him to find the sources of all the causes of noise in telephone lines. Jansky spent several years on this work, and meticulously identified all sources of noise but one. He eventually demonstrated that this last source of noise originated beyond the earth, and thus was born the science of radioastronomy.

And all of these favorable consequences, including the political decision of Franklin D. Roosevelt's administration to leave AT&T in private hands, arose directly and indirectly from Vail's inspired understanding that the business of his company was service, and doing something equally inspired about it.

This brings us at last to the question, What is the business, or more properly the mission, of the Committee for Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal (CSICOP)? Surely, it is far more all-encompassing than debunking UFOs, the Bermuda Triangle, the Loch Ness Monster, health nostrums, astrology, creationism, and the whole ever-expanding gamut of misleading, outlandish, and fraudulent claims made in the name of science. And the right and apt answer to "What is CSICOP's mission?" is likely to have a host of long-term favorable consequences in the same way that Vail's answer had for the fortunes of AT&T, many of them unknowable at the time his answer was suggested and implemented.

Those of us who have been speakers on the regional and national media circuits know in our collective guts that no matter how articulate, witty, disarming, and convincing we may be, in the last analysis we change very few minds. And that is being optimistic! The rest of the time, when we are not preaching to our collective choirs, we converse knowingly with each other, reading our articles and books, and meeting at our conferences, deploring the sad state of affairs beyond our ken. And no one has yet collected James Randi's legendary $10,000 (now more than a collective million-dollar) challenge.

The result is that despite the impressive progress CSICOP and its satellites have made since its founding, collectively we remain a series of small islands of rational thought in the vast ocean of scientific illiteracy. Many reasons have been advanced

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over the years for this continuing state of affairs.

The polygraph is still being used and widely advertised as a proven method of detecting lies. Astrology columns without CSICOP's disclaimer still abound in periodicals across the country. National television networks still broadcast nonsense about creationism and perpetual motion machines. Roswell, New Mexico, is still a mecca of UFO buffs. If anything, the sheer volume of these and many other myths persist with a commercial vengeance. Billions of dollars in revenue sustain the purveyors of fraud and fairy tales.

By contrast we skeptics have to pinch pennies, put our pitiful fingers in the dikes, and try, without much success, to outshout some sense over the cacophonous clamor. The sad truth is that we cannot possibly compete on an even playing field against this collectivity. We are not likely to do so until science is properly taught in our schools, and until those informed students graduate as writers, editors, publishers, and network executives, promoted through the ranks. This is not likely to happen in our lifetimes, but in the meantime we cannot afford to stand still. We have to fight the good battle regardless of the odds. And I believe that we can make a difference.

Ultimately it is our benevolent credibility rather than whatever political clout we may possess that will make the difference.

The first and foremost criterion of enhanced effectiveness is to devote more time to the uninformed collectivity, and decrease the time speaking to ourselves. We perhaps should focus on the decision makers at the local, regional, state, and federal levels. An excellent model for this is the valiant Eugenie C. Scott and her National Center for Science Education, which advances the cause of evolutionary science in response to the creationist threat. But this still leaves the fundamental issue, the reason for this essay, unanswered.

The premise is that no matter what we do and how we do it, we are unlikely to convince enough well-meaning and intelligent people that rational thought is the very foundation of our society and that scientific knowledge has given us the tools to enhance the quality of our lives. But we should perhaps purposefully forego the goal of convincing the unconvinced that we hold the torch of truth illuminating the darkness. We may not think that this is what we are, in fact, attempting to do. But across the chasm that separates the skeptic from the convinced, we too often come across as the self-righteous proselytizer. And in the welter of messages that constantly assail us from every quadrant, a society where fifteen-second sound bites rule, ours is often diminished, laughed away, adulterated, defamed, or ignored, if not lost altogether.

Ultimately it is our benevolent credibility rather than whatever political clout we may possess that will make the difference. And the first step toward that enhanced credibility is to lower our expectations. Most people stand in firm defense of their convictions, because in today's world, where it is difficult to believe anything, there is comfort and safety in holding onto a core of beliefs, whatever their rational merit. *"Give me the benefit of your convictions, if you have any, but keep your doubts to yourself for I have enough of my own,"* wrote Goethe. Of course, education is intended to equip every sentient human being with two fundamental tools for coping with the other social animals of his tribe: The first is the communication tool of reading, writing, counting, and knowing the tribe's history and traditions. The second is the rational thinking tool, without which the first tool cannot effectively be applied.

It is the thinking tool that CSICOP is primarily concerned with. It is inevitable that some of the facts and concepts we absorb as children are either perishable or damaged goods, yet persist into adulthood. Adults are better equipped to filter that intellectual bounty, but the price paid is that established convictions are rapidly carved in stone.

And CSICOP has chosen to challenge some of these unshakable convictions for what it views as the betterment of society. The rational fulcrum of this process is the scientific method, whose power in the affairs of men is difficult to denigrate. If the reader has any doubt on this score, he is invited to try to identify a twentieth century philosopher who has had more drastic impact on our daily lives than a twentieth century scientist such as Albert Einstein.

In the face of this intellectual brick wall of given convictions and scientific illiteracy, what can CSICOP accomplish in a reasonable time with the limited resources at its command? Or, even if CSICOP had these resources multiplied by ten, a hundred, or even a thousand times? The answer is, very little, if the goal is to refashion the given convictions into rational ones. But there is another way to approach the problem, stated witheringly by Oliver Cromwell in a letter he wrote to the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland on August 5, 1650: *"I beseech you, in the bowels of Christ, think it possible you may be mistaken. . . ."*

". . . Think it possible you may be mistaken . . ." is exactly what CSICOP ought to aim for as its ultimate goal. *To plant a seed of doubt* into an unwavering conviction is a vast accomplishment in education as well as in thinking on one's own. To be able to doubt is humbling and constructive because it requires the application of rational thought in weighing alternatives. Once that seed has been planted, it can germinate into a full reexamination of the options, which opens unlimited vistas, or it can remain a dormant seed. In either case, the process cannot help but enrich each human being and make him or her a more effective and a more balanced member of a better society.

To have accomplished this remarkable feat would be the ultimate accolade for any organization. It is within the scope of what CSICOP can achieve, and in all humility, it ought to aim for that attainable goal.

Note

1. Peter Drucker, *Management: Tasks, Responsibilities, Practices.* Harper's College Press, N.Y. (1977) □