

An occasional column, in which Mole and other characters share their views on various aspects of life-science research. Correspondence for Mole and his friends can be sent to [mole@biologists.com](mailto:mole@biologists.com), and may be published in forthcoming issues.



## Priests and Clowns

I think it was Buckaroo Banzai who said, "Wherever you go, there you are." It makes me laugh, that line, but there is a deeper wisdom in it. And here I am, sitting on an island off the coast of Australia, chatting with a cockatoo who has dropped by for a visit (I talk, he eats peanuts). And yesterday I was on a gorgeous beach with my great friend Professor Mink, enjoying the scenery and talking about our strange and wonderful profession. He likes peanuts, too, but we didn't have any.

Professor Mink has a serious mind, reading philosophers I have never heard of, usually in their original language. But like me, he has a, um, playful demeanor, and we have great fun. We were dressed in skin-tight, bright pink lycra suits from the tops of our heads to our feet, and we paused our discussion whenever passers-by asked to have their pictures taken with us. Maybe we looked silly but – you wait – next year everyone will be wearing these.

Mink has an idea I want to share. He suggests that there are two ways that acquired wisdom

has been passed down in human societies since before recorded history. And thinking about these ways can help us decide how we choose to pass our hard-earned results to our community of fellow explorers.

First, there are the priests. These are serious, learned souls who know of fundamental truths, and we endow them with our respect for their serious teachings. As thinking beings, we are not required to believe what they tell us, of course, but we listen to what they say and, depending on our predilections and our society, we often follow them.

Whether or not you are a biomedical scientist (I'm going to bet you are), you know some of the priests around us. They inspire us with their intellect and their ideas, and they teach us through their talks and writings. We aspire to be them, occupying the plenary sessions at major meetings and some of us (maybe you) will be admitted to their circle. Of course it is not only a matter of style, intellect, and stature – these priests speak to us again and again because they really do have something important to say, every time. They have earned the respect we give them, even if we may quibble with what they tell us. Don't get me wrong – we are intellectuals, not blind followers, and these are not priests who expect to be believed simply because they are respected. They know how things are.

But there is a funny thing about the priests. How often have we asked about a talk we've missed by famous Professor Lion, to be told that it was *wonderful*, but no one can remember quite what had been said? "Sorry, I didn't take any notes because it was so interesting but, trust me, it was *great*." Maybe there is something 'priestly' about these priests after all.

There is a second way, Mink told me, a second character who passes on the acquired

wisdom. These are the clowns. They encourage us to laugh at them and at ourselves, who we see in them. They don't pontificate, except in jest. I confess I had always thought of clowns only as diversion, but Mink has a point. In their antics they slip their wisdom past our defenses.

Laughter is a social force that unites us in our societies. Really. The power can be seen in viral videos that move through our awareness as no scientific discourse can. Or in an old toy the 'laugh bag' that contained a recorded, very infectious guffaw that had us rolling at parties. There are studies on the social force of laughter, so don't just take my word for it.

We know the clowns in our profession, writing clever reviews that make us smile (while informing us) and giving funny talks. The best of these clowns pepper the plenary sessions, not only because they entertain (but, yes, they do) but because there is brilliance behind the silliness. And we never miss their talks.

But there is a danger here as well. When I was a young Assistant Mole, working (I now realize) on my clown skills – I don't have to tell you that I tended to aspire more to clown than to priest, do I? – I started my talk with a pretty funny bit involving a series of slides. Yes, this was way – way, way back when we used actual slides. And I reckoned it worked, because people listened (and laughed), and then they kept listening. But then, after one of these talks, a senior scientist congratulated me on giving a *wonderful* presentation, saying, "I have no idea what you were talking about but it was so *funny*."

So I put away all the amusing slides and jokes, and ensured that the content had a certain gravitas. But I can't help it, I get excited about the work (and it doesn't matter how many times I've talked about it), and the clown comes out.

Maybe not so hysterical but (I hope) just as entertaining. The jokes I save for the bar.

Maybe there is a continuum from priest to clown. We decide where we should be on this scale: serious but not *too* serious, funny but not *too* funny. It's up to you.

There is another way to look at this, Mink told me. We often take scientific findings on something akin to faith, believing experimental results because they are repeatable. But we know that there is always a chance that, however small, the results are due to chance – that's what '*P* values' tell us. And we often distance ourselves from our own results for this reason, just as a clown might distance herself from observed behavior. You don't think so? Look how we write papers, using the passive voice and qualifiers far beyond the recommended norm: it was observed that; our findings suggest that; the results show; etcetera, etcetera.

In our formal writing and presentations, we must lean to the priest in us, rigorously relating impersonal results that we probe for the underlying truths we assert lie beneath (or hope so). But in our discussions and reviews, we create the stories of what might be so and play them out to entertain and, in doing so, convince.

Or to put it another way: A priest and a clown are out fishing but had caught no fish. "I know there are fish in this lake," says the priest, "because I can feel them tugging at the bait." "I don't know if there are any fish," replies the clown, "but it's a nice day, and you have your fishing line wrapped around your foot."

Hey, the cockatoo is back, and I have to open another bag of peanuts.

*Mole*

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