

Horton's

Michigan Notebook

Political & Social Commentary

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Science & Politics

When I began classes at Michigan State University in the fall of 1969, among the required courses for freshmen was Natural Science. We were expected to take it for three quarters (a full school year), with the initial ten weeks focused on physics.

I was commuting from home, one foot still in the hometown social scene and the other testing the waters of college life. All too soon I discovered my high-school study habits would not cut the mustard at this institution of higher learning.

This became even more evident when my grades arrived in late December, a couple of weeks after final exams. To my chagrin, I had a pair of B's in classes I would have aced in high school and, as for Natural Science, a shocking D.

That winter, residing in a dormitory on campus, I vowed to improve my science grade—not an easy task since the subject had never engaged my interest.

The emphasis for the second term was biology. I dutifully read each chapter of the textbook, took notes at the lectures, and—for good measure—completely re-read the entire book prior to the final exam.

I got a C, which I regarded as a major achievement.

Fifty years later, I haven't retained much of those long-ago lessons, although it did give me a rudimentary awareness of how a cell functions and a slightly-better grasp of how tissues, organs, and biological systems work. As for the earlier physics class, about the only thing I recall is the professor reciting the famous quote by Isaac Newton: "If I have seen further than others, it is by standing on the shoulders of giants."

The advances of science are usually incremental, a slow and steady pace forward, although on occasion an unexpected leap occurs. For the most part it is a collaborative gathering of knowledge, gained through hypothesis, followed by testing and experimentation, and the review of peers.

Ultimate truth, I suppose, is the Holy Grail. But since that can never be certain, the final conclusion is called a 'theory.' As such, it stands as the accepted version until a better explanation comes along.

Since the first news reports began appearing earlier this year that a novel coronavirus posed a threat, the warnings from the epidemiologists and other medical people with an expertise in this field have pretty much come to pass. The disease spread like wild fire out of China, reached Europe, and all-too-soon arrived in the United States.

Once here, the rate-of-infection shot up, as predicted, with thousands of people coming down with what has come to be known as the COVID-19 virus. During the intervening

weeks, most of those patients have recovered, experiencing only mild symptoms and were able to stay at home. However, thousands of people have ended up in the hospital, suffering life-threatening symptoms, and thus far over 90,000 have died.

The victims included the elderly and people with underlying medical conditions, but seemingly healthy people also succumbed to the disease. The poor, as is often the case in a pandemic, got hit the hardest; however, the rich and famous have not been spared.

As Michiganders are well aware, our governor declared a state of emergency when two residents were diagnosed with COVID-19 and then suspended in-person classes at the K-12 schools, followed by the closure of restaurants and other businesses where large numbers of people gather in close proximity. This was quickly followed by her shelter-in-place order and the shutting down of many other businesses and services, along with the banning or curtailment of numerous recreational or social activities.

Gov. Gretchen Whitmer's strategy—recommended by the health experts—was to slow the spread of the disease by limiting person-to-person contact as much as possible and, when folks are out-and-about, employing social distancing. The goal is to “flatten the curve.”

As we are also well aware, the order—its scope and application—has not been met with agreement in all quarters. The adverse impact on businesses, the number of employees out-of-work, and the downturn in general economy have been brought up as a counterpoint. Plus, a number of people feel Steve Horton Column their rights are being violated by the stay-at-home directive and the closing of their businesses.

Interestingly, a person's political allegiance or cultural outlook seems to determine their views concerning the coronavirus—how much of a threat it poses and the best remedy

for dealing with it. Even the accuracy of the death count has become a matter of disagreement.

COVID-19, like so much else, has become another battleground in the partisan wars.

Being in business and dependent on other businesses in this community for my livelihood, the closures have hurt. Yet, the science of social distancing as a means of slowing the spread of the disease makes sense.

While I, like the rest of Michigan and the rest of the world for that matter, want things “to get back to normal as soon as possible,” the risks need to be taken into account and not cavalierly brushed aside.

Call me perverse, but I put faith in people who not only read that biology book in college, but have gone on to read even more complex textbooks, earned degrees, and have words like doctor, scientist, and health professional affixed to their name.

While I have gained a decent amount of knowledge since attending MSU (at least I think so), along with the benefits of experience—much of it from trial-and-error—I don't profess to be an expert on viruses, how they spread, effective treatments for them, and the best strategies for their curtailment. In that regard, I find a little humility useful since it wouldn't take much to expose my ignorance were I to offer advice one way or the other.

I would hazard a guess that many people who have been expressing firm opinions on this and other related matters regarding this brand-new coronavirus have about the same level of scientific and medical expertise as I do, which is very little even with my having the advantage of reading that ‘Introduction to Biology’ book twice in college.

On the other hand, I believe I stand on steadier ground knowledge-wise when it comes to politics—a catch-all word for

election campaigns, day-to-day governance, and public policy discourse.

Of course, discussion of politics would usually include politicians, be they elected or appointed officials, candidates, and their campaign staffs.

Over the years, I've had the pleasure of meeting and in many cases getting to know these men and women who run our government—or want to. While bashing politicians is a national pastime, I've found most of them to be decent enough—guided by principles, a wish to serve, and a viewpoint on how to make the world a better place.

True, they tend to be ambitious and self-assured, but then running for office or being a public official is not for shrinking violets.

I should add that my main acquaintance with politicians—or politics for that matter—has been at the local and state levels: First as a young enthusiast, then as an interested citizen, and finally as a reporter and commentator.

Politics can be high-minded, even a noble calling, yet—when you strip away the veneer—it's about obtaining and then exercising power...the means of deciding who gets to control government, determine policies, and influence society—now and in the future.

It is often a bare-knuckled affair, with the rules of engagement and fair play not always observed.

In fact, as we well know, there can be a dark side where public officials, candidates, campaign operatives, office staff, and diehard partisans are misleading, even deceptive, in their use of language and approach to facts—a fancy way of saying that 'truth' or a close proximity to it is not always a priority or a concern.

In George Orwell's famous book *1984*, the protagonist, Winston Smith worked at the Ministry of Truth with the job of rewriting history.

He might feel right at home with some of our current political practices, joining those who create attack ads, put out slanted news releases, offer spins, walk back embarrassing comments, claim that a former position is not contrary to a current stance, and hold the opposition to a higher standard than their own.

He'd also understand the time-honored tactic of 'waving the bloody shirt' as a means to incite the emotions or divert attention from other issues, along with the corruption of language as a political tool—better known as propaganda.

Of course, while offering that less-than-flattering observation, this brand of politics—with two main political parties vying for power—is how we operate our representative democracy. So, while not always liking the unsavory side of campaigns and governance, it beats a dictatorship, one-party state, or closed society where an outspoken or contrary view is treated as criminal.

However, that doesn't mean we shouldn't strive for improvement or speak out against the excesses and untruths. Nor should we regard civility and high standards of conduct as exceptions to the rule.

The doctors, scientists, and health professionals advising us on the current pandemic may not be infallible or "the end all"—after all none of us are that—and other important considerations need to be part of the decision-making, including the impact that closures and stay-at-home directives are having on the economy and people's livelihoods.

Still, their input ought not be summarily dismissed because it's politically inconvenient or contradicts a preferred narrative. Nor should their value, not to mention reputations, or the importance of science and the scientific approach, be sacrificed at the altar of political expediency or become a casualty in the partisan disputes.