

## Tragedy on the tube is not entertainment

As if the Amy Fisher trilogy wasn't enough, television networks, bastions of creativity, are preparing to bring us even more inspiring, true-life dramas.

CBS has paid \$500,000 to James and Jennifer Stolpa, the couple who, with their baby, was caught in a Nevada snowstorm. A few weeks later, Rob and Dee Dubin got lost during an Aspen cross county ski trip. They've since signed with the William Morris Agency and are awaiting offers.

Is this the new career for the 1990s? Get stupid, get lost, get rich?

While those movies may be simply stupid, the genuine tragedy-based shows border on tasteless. The Amy Fisher trilogy is the most sordid example of television gone bad. Does America really need six hours of a whiny New York teenage brat shooting a woman in the head?

Apparently so, if you look at the ratings. All three movies rated in the top 15 for the week they ran. It's not clear which is more distressing — the networks fever to bring us this trash, or our apparent desire to watch it.

In the past three months, networks have given us stories about the 1992 Oakland Hills fire and the 1989 San Francisco earthquake. And to give the movies that added sense of credibility, the producers used actual video footage of the disasters. Creativity at its grandest.

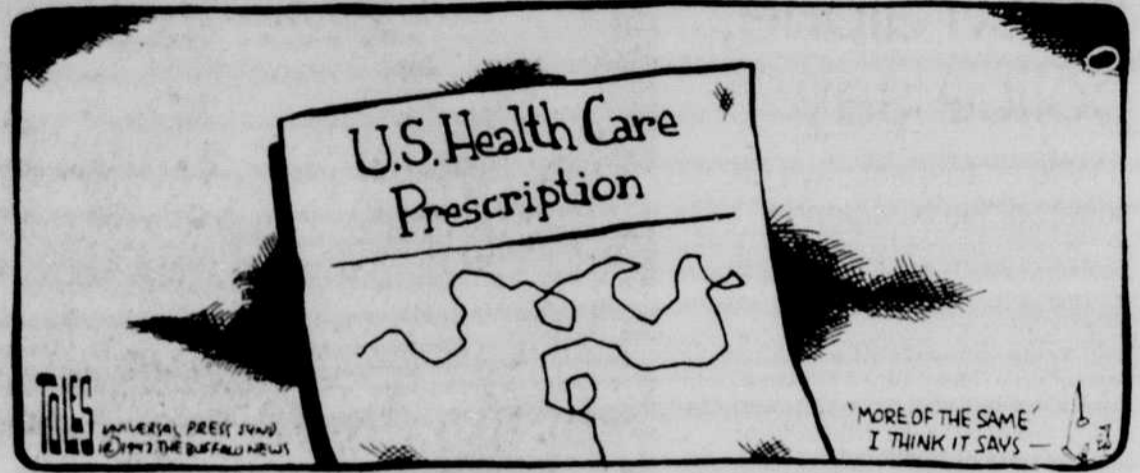
But now, straight out of today's headlines, NBC is preparing to bring us the stories of the Waco, er, Waco cult standoff and the World Trade Center bombing.

The Waco story will be told on *In The Line of Duty: Assault in Waco*. (Perhaps a better title would be *How Not to Serve a Search Warrant*.) The show itself is a weekly series that focuses on law enforcement officials who have been killed in the line of duty. Now there's family entertainment.

The Trade Center story will be titled *Terror in the Towers*. Actually, if NBC could just rerun *The Towering Inferno*, complete with dubbed New York accents, they would only need to film a segment dealing with the actual blowing up of the van. *Dateline NBC* probably has some footage they could use.

Unfortunately, as long as the public watches these shows, the networks will continue to make them. It's almost enough to make a person watch PBS during a pledge drive.

**CBS has paid \$500,000 to a couple who were caught in a snowstorm. Is this the new career for the 1990s? Get stupid, get lost, get rich?**



COMMENTARY

## Academia should test beliefs

By Ron Rousseve

As an applied psychologist in the twilight years of my academic career, I remain concerned about the pervasive problem of "cognitive compartmentalization" among human beings.

In short, from a mental health perspective, I contend that the intellectual partitioning that stems from our early religious indoctrination must be confronted with critical candor in the interest of psychological consistency and personal integrity.

Regarding an interpretive scaffold for the observations that follow, the kind of doctrinal religion I have in mind can be defined as "a system of beliefs that looks to divine supernatural forces for the meaning of human existence and for the rules of behavior designed to cope with existential anxieties."

Moreover, this commentary is anchored to the conviction that in the dispassionate search for knowledge and truth to which the academic community is committed, we cannot endorse an "anything goes" attitude or the notion of "self-authenticating" personal experience and belief. In other words, hypotheses, draft explanatory propositions and tentative beliefs must be subjected to tests of validation.

Accordingly, during my young adult years as I learned to think scientifically, I gradually came to the realization that there is insufficient evidence for belief in the existence of God and a realm of transcendent, supernatural forces.

The notion of "virgin birth" is a contradiction in terms. And there is no satisfactory way of reconciling the image of an all-knowing, all-good, all-powerful God with the reality of natural evil in the world, e.g. cyclones, volcanic eruptions, earthquakes that annihilate innocent victims. (To assert that "God works in mysterious ways" is, of course, a

non-response to the enigma of evil in nature.)

When one is no longer capable of ignoring the absence of plausible evidence, intellectual integrity then requires that one abandon a stance of uncritical belief in propositions that do not meet the tests of verifiable intelligibility.

Claims of "divine revelation" are completely uncorroborated — and therefore traditional religious literature is best regarded as the mythological expressions of human beings hungering for a sense of ultimate meaning amid the unanswered questions of existence, and the absurdities and tribulations encountered in life.

There is no conclusive evidence of any ethereal afterlife for humankind — and therefore the religious story of humankind's fall from God's grace and eventual redemption through a sacrificial savior seems to be a strangely comforting illusion fed by the wish for immortality.

Without any validated rational basis for the assertion that a transcendental deity fashioned the universe, the belief that a Godly rescuer does indeed exist can only rest on a peculiar "faith" that is disconnected from reason and science — and the real world, as scholars have come to know it in modern times.

Readers whose personal belief systems are still based, in part, on religious faith will undoubtedly express reservations about the foregoing critique offered by a post-Christian agnostic. However, religious propositions should not be regarded as immune to critical rational scrutiny.

Moreover, those of us whose professional work is flavored by a high regard for scientific validation cannot maintain our integrity if we uncritically acquiesce to belief systems for which no adequate verification exists. Such "intellectual partitioning" smacks of psychologi-

cal shallowness and conflicts with our professed commitment to healthy operational consistency.

These reflections point to the continuing conflict between the supernatural religious world view and the world view of naturalistic humanism. The two orientations are cognitively irreconcilable, and attempting to "straddle" these conflicting paradigms only fosters incongruent compartmentalization.

It follows that if the inconsistent, dichotomous partitioning discussed in this essay is to be resolved, critically informed choice will have to be considered. It is on that basis that I have evolved into a "post-Christian existential humanist."

Perhaps a concluding tangible example can be cited here to flesh out more fully the conflict in question. Many human beings continue to acknowledge their belief in some ethereal form of personal existence after death. However, evidence now tends to support the claim that mind or consciousness is a function of the brain.

This contemporary stance is clearly incompatible with the old "dualism" of physical body and immortal soul. The logical implication is that if the brain is the seat of our conscious awareness, then when death occurs and brain activity ceases, we, as personal entities, also must cease to exist. In short, the probability is that self-hood is fully extinguished when the body dies.

In sum, propositions that are not backed up by evidence and credible validation procedures do not constitute genuine knowledge, but merely unsubstantiated belief.

Disciplined rational scrutiny undermines religious mythology.

Ron Rousseve is a professor in counseling psychology at the University.

## Oregon Daily Emerald

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