

ON THE HYPOCRISY OF CHURCH AND STATE: GENES, SOULS AND REEFER MADNESS

Tom Givón

The Nobel prize for Physiology/Medicine has just been awarded to J. B. Gurdon of Britain and S. Yamanaka of Japan. Their works span fifty years of research designed to answer one of the most fundamental questions of Biology--how does an embryonic cell, with potential for turning into **any** cell-type in the body, lose its flexibility and mature into a narrowly specialized skin, blood, nerve, bone, lung, muscle, egg or sperm cell? More vexing yet, can such specialization be reversed to turn any mature cell-type back into a flexible embryonic cell? Dr. Gurdon answered the second question in the affirmative in the 1960s, taking the nucleus out of a mature intestinal cell of a frog, injecting it into a de-nucleated frog egg-cell and producing a neonate tadpoles. Dr. Takayama later elucidated the gene-expression control mechanism that turns this process on or off.

The Nobel award could not have designated more seminal studies, sitting as they were at the crossroads of **genetics**, the rigid evolutionary endowment of a species, and **development**, the more flexible context-sensitive unfolding of each individual life. But for those of us who live in Colorado, the work of Professors Gurdon and Yamanaka also intersects with the politics of pseudo-science--the Myth of the Fertilized Egg.

For the third election-cycle in a row, a group of religious zealots are trying to cram down our throat state-mandated designation of the fertilized egg as a person, endowed with full civil and legal rights. But what the just-Nobeled studies reminds us is that **every** cell in the body of a biological organism, human or otherwise, comes with a full complement of genes (DNA) that specify the full design of both embryo and adult and, more to the point, the developmental trajectory from one to the other. Every such cell can, in principle, be induced to mature into a full-fledged organism. The zealots pushing the "human rights"--a.k.a. "personhood-begins-at-conception"--ballot measure had better amend their amendment, so that it may endow every cell in the human body with civil rights and personhood.

But it gets better. The Person in Whose name these zealots presume to speak must now revise His procedures too. Not only must He leap into action every time a human egg is fertilized on this planet and insert a soul into the just-created fully-nucleated zygote, a fete of incredible vigilance and invasion of privacy; but He must now endow every cell in the human body, upon every instance of cell division--millions per person per hour--with the same God-given soul and personhood previously reserved for the fertilized egg. For if one wishes to partake in the game of science, one had better play by the rules, especially if one is the Heavenly One reputed to have set up the rules.

Now speaking of pseudo-science, the hypocrisy of our anti-marijuana laws continues to defy both science and common sense, let alone common decency. We have been allowing two of the most destructive, addictive chemical agents known to man, nicotine and ethanol, to be legally produced and hawked and pushed--and profited from. We let giant corporations snare our young and vulnerable into life-long dependency and untold suffering. To add insult to injury, we collect hefty taxes off the misery and havoc wreaked by tobacco and alcohol.

And then we have the temerity to outlaw, criminalize and severely punish the use of one largely non-addictive, mildly euphoric, benevolent weed--with no scintilla of scientific evidence to back up our Reefer Madness fantasies. Indeed, our Governor, who made a respectable Vulture Capitalist living producing and dispensing one of those addictive poisons, is now, in a fit of utter hypocrisy, urging us to not legalize the ol' weed.

Just once, for the sake of truth in packaging, let me recount the life experience of the generation I happen to belong to. We earned our multiple graduate degrees in the Sixties; we had 40-year professional careers; we loved our families, raised our children, worked out butts off; as your friends and neighbors we are still productive contributors to our society, community and --yes--Church. And all the while, on the sly, in our spare time, we have been indulging in the good weed; peacefully, disrupting neither life nor work nor family.

True, we turned our backs our parents' use of the twin demons tobacco and alcohol. No wonder, as children we witnessed the havoc. But our lives taken together are a silent if eloquent testimony to the insanity--indeed the utter imbecility and above all flaming hypocrisy--of Reefer Madness and the legal nightmare it has spawned. As one of our old songs ("Where have All the Flowers Gone?") has observed, Oh Will They Ever Learn?

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His next novel, "Downfall of a Jesuit",
is slated to come out later this month.