

THE SEVEN MYSTERIES OF THE UNIVERSE

Remarks to the Graduates, Buckley School, New York, 12 June 2002
by Conn Nugent, Executive Director, The J.M. Kaplan Fund

We all know the drill. A speaker (me) tells the graduates (you) about aspects of life that are seen more clearly from the vantage of the old speaker than they are from the vantage of the young student. *I know something you don't know yet.* Usually this information is accompanied by some advice from the speaker. *Since I know about this thing that you don't know about yet, let me tell you what it is and how your behavior should change as a result.* In the old days – the Sixties – advice from speaker to students tended to the serious side. Avoid nuclear annihilation; enforce civil rights; care for the downtrodden. Lately it has become fashionable for speakers to offer lighter advice. Advice has become warm. Advice has become hip. But it's still advice.

By next September you will have forgotten every bit of advice I can offer. So let's just take a short cut. I will present you with no advice. I will go even further. Not only will I offer no advice, I will also inform you about the important parts of life about which you can *never* receive reliable advice. I want to tell you things that you don't understand yet, that I don't understand still, and that – as a matter of fact – nobody will ever understand. About these things you will go to your graves fundamentally, pig ignorant. These are The Seven Great Mysteries of The Universe.

Mystery Number One: Sex. Forget it. You are never going to be able to figure out sex, yours or anybody else's. Some days you will think you care about sex rather less than other people seem to care about it. Some days you will think you are the most eroticized creature in human history. Some days you will feel quite attractive, all things considered, and some days you'll feel that you've been whomped hard with the ugly stick. You will believe that sex is an expression of affection and you will believe that affection is a convenient excuse for sex. And no matter what you think or believe, it will be true, but usually not when you think it is, and never when you say it is. So just give it up, gentlemen – give up thinking about it, that is – and settle for bringing to your intimate relations something of the honesty and sensitivity and fellow-feeling that now characterize your discussions on the future of Mike Piazza.

Mystery Number Two: Money. Here is one of life's great paradoxes. Money does not buy happiness, but neither does no money. Now having enough money is, generally speaking, more attractive a goal than not having enough money. The problem is, you will never be able to figure out how much money is enough and how much money is not enough. They keep moving the goal line! Just when you think you've got it made – apartment, country house, private school, car, pension – just when you think you might have enough – damned if you don't need something else. A bigger apartment, a house south of the highway, a private school with higher SATs, a torquier car, a fatter pension. You will never be satisfied because you'll never know what satisfaction means. Ha-ha.

You will also never fully understand **Mystery Number Three: The Intentional Grounding Rule.** If the past four decades provide any guidance, the National Football League each year will change the Intentional Grounding Rule so as to maximize your confusion and frustrate your comprehension. You will try – but fail – to keep up with the annual iterations on whether the quarterback throws from a protected zone or a suspect zone, whether an eligible receiver is standing in the same ZIP Code as the quarterback, or whether the referee's opinion regarding the fine line between stealth and incompetence will have moved one degree or another along the spectrum of observable science. Please: I am *not* saying you will never understand the Roughing The Passer Rule; I am *not* saying that you will never understand the Icing Rule, or the Balk Rule, or the General Theory of Relativity, or ballot standards of the State of Florida. These things

are within your grasp. But intentional grounding by the quarterback? No. Sorry.

Mystery Number Four: The Weather enjoys Mystery Hall of Fame status. Ever since the invention of the Temperature Humidity Index in Mesopotamia 12,000 years ago, human beings have spoken with confidence and ignorance about meteorological events that never occur. "*Looks like rain tomorrow, Nebuchadnezzar.*" "*Sure does, Gilgamesh.*" And 21st Century you won't know either, notwithstanding AccuWeather, Doppler radar, Al Roker, whatever. The odds on your being right will improve, but you will be wrong inevitably and frequently. And here's a new twist, developed just in time to throw you for another loop. Not only will you gentlemen not know what's going to happen with the weather, you're not going to know what's going to happen with the *climate*. Climate, as you know, is just weather multiplied by 40,000 and divided by 365. In the good old days, people could be ignorant about the weather but actually know something about climate. People could say "Outer Slobovia enjoys a moderate climate that provides 21 inches of rain annually, most of it concentrated in a September-to-March wet season with temperatures rarely exceeding 55 degrees Fahrenheit." But thanks to your parents' generation and your grandparents' generation, all those almanac bets are off. We've gone ahead and changed the climate on you! Maybe Outer Slobovia's wet season will go dry. Maybe there will be thunderstorms in May and drought in February. Maybe Slobovians will become accustomed to lots of Gobi Desert beach days in the high 90s. I don't know. They don't know. You don't know. You can rest easier, though, in appreciation that the Bush Administration is studying the problem and will be prepared to propose some pretty tough regulations for the Year 2019.

Perhaps your unavoidable ignorance about weather is really a subset of a larger cluelessness about the dominant forces in the universe. I am referring, of course, to **Mystery Number Five: God**. Just give up right now trying to puzzle out what they call God's Will. In the last year alone, we've been told that God's Will was responsible for mass murder, Enron stock, and the continued popularity of Christina Aguilera. I do not mean that you shouldn't serve God, praise God, honor God. By all means. But just remember – you'll never really know how He operates, much less what She wants.

Mystery Number Six is Mystery Number Five as read by a dyslexic: not God, Dog. Why, oh why, were human beings – so mean, so petty, so thoroughly undeserving – given the remarkable, glorious gift of the dog? Your average dog, offered a mediocre standard of care, will adore and amuse and console and enlarge its human master. Your dog will think you wise and brave and powerful. It will listen attentively to your pointless stories. It will limber your throwing arm, and fortify your cardiovascular system. And you will never know why, for the dog exists beyond logic. The dog is an act of grace.

Come to think of it, maybe Mystery Number Six tends to undermine Mystery Number Five. I mean, the mystery of Dog subtracts a little from the totality of the mystery of God. Which is to say, maybe God is trying to tell us something through Dog.

And that, I suspect, is **Mystery Number Seven: Love**. Look, gentlemen. I am as tough as any of you – I used to be, anyway – and it is a little embarrassing to use the word “love” without any irony, without any wink of the eye to let you know that we’re not about to turn squishy up here. But I’ve got to tell you. There is this crazy force at work in the universe that attracts beings to other beings. Maybe it’s just gravity or some kind of molecular phenomenon. But, willy-nilly, we people seem to be *drawn* to other people, to other places, to other states of mind – to things that are outside of us – and we want to bring them closer. And sometimes that attraction is really very strong. Particularly when it gets mixed up with good old Mystery Number One. Sometimes we get scared, and sometimes we blunder, and we push away these things that we felt attracted to, maybe even still feel attracted to. It’s a mess. It’s all a big mystery. You’ll never understand it. But I’ve got to tell you something (sorry, here comes the advice): Don’t be afraid to love and to be loved. Love is the best thing. By far.

Good luck, everybody.