

The Case of the Lost Panda

Hans van Kampen

On a beautiful day in spring a man walked on a small bridge in the shopping center of a rural town in the heart of Holland. He moved along inconspicuously in a crowd of shoppers. Suddenly the man stopped and began staring at the surface of the water. His gestures indicated that there was something going on in the water. Something serious, something of interest. Within a few minutes dozens of people gathered on the bridge and looked over the parapets, but they saw only their reflections on the water's surface.

Is it only curiosity that forms the motive for people to become involved in cases like the man on the bridge? Is this behavior so fundamental that we may conclude that the need to learn is the reason for it? I don't believe so. The behavior of these people revealed that sympathy was also a factor. Those who did not feel the same emotions and share the same associations simply walked by.

A recent development in the Dutch animal world gave the man-on-the-bridge incident an interesting dimension. On Sunday, December 10, 1978, a small panda escaped from his winter shelter in the Blijdorp Zoo in Rotterdam. Since the Chinese improved their relations with the free world by exporting this species, every visitor of a zoo where the *Ailuropoda melanoleuca* is to be seen knows its intelligent and sympathetic nature. So it was predictable that our panda would walk out of his cage to investigate the outer world. This, of course, upset the zoo attendants, who feared for their jobs, and they informed the newspaper *Algemeen Dagblad*. At the very moment this newspaper reported that the panda was lost, it was found dead on a railroad track some 500 meters from its shelter. It appeared to have been hit by a passing train.

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The readers of the newspaper, unaware of the latest findings, began to react to the article. From all over the Netherlands phone calls came in to the zoo from people who claimed to have seen the panda. Within a few days the zoo received a hundred hints about where to find the lost animal. Since these reports came after the panda involved was dead and buried, it left the zoo staff puzzled. What was responsible for the obvious "panda flap." "Possibly people saw foxes or other misidentified animals," a spokesman for the zoo said. The December 13 newspaper revealed the sad truth about the panda, and this apparently stopped the stream of misinformation into the zoo, since no new reports were received after that story appeared.

It is of interest to know that this panda event happened a few days before a worldwide "UFO flap" occurred. Since the middle of December 1978, researchers of claims about so-called UFOs noticed a drastic increase in UFO reports. Most publicized of these was an occurrence in New Zealand, where, in the middle of the summer, nocturnal lights were seen low over the horizon and high in the sky. As we remember from our man-on-the-bridge incident, suggestive behavior may arouse curiosity and sympathy. When the newspapers began publishing reports about the New Zealand UFOs and after the film made in New Zealand by Quentin Fogarty was shown on television, many people throughout the world were inspired to look up and see. In South Africa, Mrs. Meagan Quezet claimed that she and her son had suddenly met five or six alien beings "to whom I tried to communicate." In Italy, a "UFO" seen near Gran Grasso was allegedly engaged in damaging a power plant.

On December 27, 1978, I was called by the Dutch Federal Police of the Dordrecht area to investigate simultaneous observations of an apparently unexpected light in the southeastern sky. Due to the early hour of the call—about 6 A.M.—it immediately occurred to me that this was a brilliant opportunity to demonstrate to the Dutch police force the true nature of the phenomenon and the fallibility of "experienced eyewitnesses" and human perception. Since I own a well-equipped research center for the study of "UFOs," I could lock into the police communications system and talk directly to the officers involved. From three different locations, separated from each other by many kilometers, observations were reported of a slowly moving, bright nocturnal light. Some police officers claimed to see the light coming closer and fading again, while others at different moments saw the light going up and down. All agreed, however, in seeing the "UFO" over the southeastern horizon. Within an hour and a half it was possible to convince these police officers that they had seen the bright planet Venus, which was at the indicated position and appeared and disappeared behind some cloud banks. Also, the crescent of the waning moon added to the

“peekaboo” effect of that particular morning. At dawn, everyone could see exactly what had happened.

The result was that I was invited to write an instructive article about “UFO” phenomena for a police newspaper.

This case revealed the factor of basic human curiosity, which I translate as the need to learn and experience combined with the “sympathy” factor of sharing feelings and associations. By guiding this sympathy toward a skeptical and sound attitude, every individual observer got the opportunity to add to the final conclusion—that the sighting had been caused by the misinterpretation of a natural phenomenon—without losing face afterward. This Netherlands Federal Police case was, in fact, the perfect case. There is no doubt in my mind that if serious “UFO” researchers could work on the spot at the time of the sighting, preferably amidst the observers, “UFOs” would no longer exist. Unfortunately that goal seems as elusive as “UFOs” themselves. ●

Prejudice and “post-judice”

Prejudice means literally pre-judgment, the rejection of a contention out of hand, before examining the evidence. Prejudice is the result of powerful emotions, not of sound reasoning. If we wish to find out the truth of a matter we must approach the questions with as nearly open a mind as we can, and with a deep awareness of our own limitations and predispositions. On the other hand, if after carefully and openly examining the evidence, we reject the proposition, that is not prejudice. It might be called “post-judice.” It is certainly a prerequisite for knowledge.

Critical and skeptical examination is the method used in everyday practical matters as well as in science. When buying a new or used car, we think it prudent to insist on written warranties, test drives and checks of particular parts. We are very careful about car dealers who are evasive on these points. Yet the practitioners of many borderline beliefs are offended when subjected to similarly close scrutiny... Where skeptical observation and discussion are suppressed, the truth is hidden.

—Carl Sagan, *Broca's Brain*, Random House, 1979