

Brother Scientist: Plenty of mystery to explore

by [Gordon Atkinson](#) in the [January 15, 2008](#) issue

There were two great, abiding mysteries in my life when I was a young boy; mysteries that I puzzled over for years but never solved. I discovered them while lying in bed trying to fall asleep. Bedtimes are convenient for adults but they may or may not align themselves with the sleep patterns of a child. I was an overactive boy who had a hard time convincing his cerebral cortex to shut down after a day of full-throttled activity.

Many nights I lay in bed, watching the shadows deepen on the walls and listening to Bible stories or music on a record player. Waiting for sleep was grueling work. Minutes slowly ticked away, and a single hour was an eternity. It was in these mysterious hours of waiting that I discovered two mysteries which I could not explain or understand.

The first I found while laying on my side practicing winking. I had only just learned to wink and was quite proud of myself. I lay on my side closing first one eye and then the other. One of my hands happened to be resting on the bed beside my face. I was amazed to see that my hand moved up and down each time I winked. If I was watching my hand with my right eye, then closed that eye and opened my left, my hand and the entire mattress would jerk upwards about an inch.

This was absolutely astonishing to me. I tried holding my hand firmly in place with my other hand, but then both hands moved up and down. I tried stacking some books on the wayward hand in an attempt to secure it in place, but then the books moved up and down along with my hand. This all happened in spite of the fact that I was holding my hand perfectly still and could not feel it move at all. Eventually I grew tired of trying to figure out the logic behind this mystery and simply accepted the phenomenon as a given reality of life.

Without knowing it, I had formed a little scientific law of my own. "If you are lying on your bed at night and wink your right and left eyes in rapid succession, things

around you will move up and down.” I never wrote this law down or even put it into words, but I believed it. Extensive experimentation showed it to be true.

The second mystery was auditory in nature, and it too occurred when I was lying in bed. I would lower my head to my pillow and become very quiet. After a moment or two I could hear what sounded like someone walking on icy snow. Crunch, crunch, crunch. When I first heard it I thought someone was coming to get me. But when I lifted my head off the pillow, the footsteps ceased.

I looked around the room and then slowly lowered my head back to the pillow. Crunch, crunch, crunch. I became frightened and the footsteps moved faster. Crunch, crunch, crunch, crunch, crunch. This happened night after night. What was particularly odd about this was that it occurred even in the summer when there was no snow anywhere around.

I finally had to make my peace with this mystery, just as I had with the first. No one was walking toward me in the snow. I was forced to form a second, unspoken law. “If you lie on your side with your head on your pillow, you will hear a man walking in the snow even though there is no man and no snow.”

I fought with these mysteries for months, running repeated experiments in my bed by winking and raising my head up and down on my pillow. I wanted to understand what was happening. I wanted to make sense of what was happening. But in the end I was left with no alternative but to accept these two unspoken laws as first principles of my small universe. Eventually my mind learned to filter out the sounds of the footsteps in the snow, and I simply chose to stop winking in bed.

These memories are very vivid for me, in part because untrained minds tend to fear mystery and receive it with a worshipful awe. Unexplainable things exist in the primitive realm of the gods, along with lightning, earthquakes and floods. You can fight with them only so long before they force you to the ground and make you say Uncle.

But if the memory of the two mysteries of my childhood is strong, the memories of when I solved them is equally so. I was sitting in a junior high science class looking at a diagram that explained the way our two eyes work together to form 3-dimensional images. Suddenly the old mystery came rushing back to me, and I almost laughed out loud. Here was the answer I had sought so long ago. I had been looking at my hand on the bed from two slightly different viewpoints! In that

moment, I slayed an ancient god with my mind and science. The power was intoxicating. I tasted the fruit of the tree of knowledge, packed my bags and left the garden. I didn't have to be thrown out; I left of my accord. And there was no going back.

I solved the mystery of the footsteps on my own when I heard them again one night in college and remembered the sound from long ago. It only took a few moments before I realized that the sound corresponded with my heartbeat. I placed my hand on my temple and felt the pulse there. I had been hearing my own pulse. I remember smiling cleverly to myself and drifting off to sleep. Another ancient god slain.

Life has always been most interesting for me at the rolling boundary between scientific explanation and dark mystery. Science is always moving forward, rolling up more data and triumphantly explaining old mysteries. At times it seems as though the ancient world of myth and dream has turned tail and fled. Not so. For every acre of forest that science paves over, myth and legend giggle and reveal ten more acres of untamed wilderness behind them. As our ability to understand the universe grows, so does our capacity for looking outward and upward and seeing all that we do not know. There is more mystery to explore now than ever before in the history of humanity.

Some people see the boundary between mystery and science as a battleground with barbed wire and trenches on either side. But I think that the place where our searching and empirical minds meet the mysteries of the world is the realm of worship and poetry. Before Adam and Eve, the world was chaos, like a vast unconscious mind with no boundaries and no definitions. The world itself hasn't changed, but our human perspective is continually solving mysteries and creating new ones as fast as we can.

Our love of answers has always been nicely balanced against our penchant for awe and worship. Reality is both a thing to be conquered and also something to be worshiped. This is the human way.

I wonder when it was that science and religion stopped seeing each other as ancient twins of the human mind and started seeing each other as competitors. While I and others like me slog it out in the worshipping world of mystery, brother scientist is observing, collating and solving mysteries as fast as he can. I don't want him to stop. I like the way he slays ancient gods. What I want is for us to embrace each other and

walk though life together. He can solve old mysteries and I can celebrate the new ones.