

CONFERENCE SEASON

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366 days. Long enough for a leap year. That's how long my story takes.

Let's begin in Berlin, on 30th August 1996. That was the date of the banquet to mark the end of EuroCAE-96, the Ninth European Conference on Art in Education.

I sat next to Julian Southern, a psychologist from York University. I told him I'd enjoyed his talk; he told me he'd read my book; and we exchanged email addresses. There wasn't much to tempt a vegetarian on the menu, but the beer was free, and I had a litre and a half

After some boring speeches from worthies on the organizing committee and presentations for the best conference paper and the best paper by a researcher under 25, the top table was cleared away for a display of Cossack dancing. A highly inappropriate choice for Berlin, I thought, but applauded anyway.

When that was over the movers and shakers of the European Association for Art in Education went back to their hotels. But Julian and I, being British academics and therefore poor, took the U-bahn to the outskirts. We were housed in a student dormitory.

As we approached the dormitory block, we heard music. The student-helpers had arranged their own end-of-conference celebration. But here the beer wasn't free. A burly student with a blonde beard told us we'd need a bottle to get in.

Julian had 2 bottles of champagne in his room as gifts for his parents. They could be replaced next day at the airport. I bought one of them from him for 25 DM and we went back downstairs, bottles in hand, to be ushered into the party.

Julian hit the dance floor straight away while I wandered over to the corner opposite the ghetto-blaster which was producing the sound-track. There I met Sonja, to whom I offered champagne. Sonja was a PhD student from Prague, as well as being the most beautiful woman on the planet.

Before long she and I were holding hands, gazing into each other's eyes, and talking earnestly about the principles of aesthetics. It happens.

Then Julian came by and whisked her off for a dance. That happens too. I took a chair by the table bearing the remnants of the food, now mostly eaten or trampled underfoot. There I sat, trying not to watch Julian and Sonja, with a half-empty bottle of champagne and my married man's conscience for company.

When the music stopped just after 3 a.m. I sloped off to bed alone. Julian and Sonja had already disappeared, unnoticed by me -- perhaps while I was gulping down the last drops of my champagne.

I had booked my flight in the evening of the next day, to allow time for gift shopping and sight-seeing, which turned out to be a major mistake. I lugged my suitcase on the U-bahn to the Zoo station, and deposited it in a locker. Fortunately there still were left-luggage lockers in those days. Then I found a Breton restaurant on Kantstrasse where the proprietor let me nurse my hangover for four hours, drinking coffee and brandy very slowly. Sight-seeing was cancelled. Presents I purchased at the airport.

Back home, I began forgetting about Berlin. My time was taken up with the horrors of preparation for the coming academic year. Then, 10 days after getting home, I received an email from Julian. It was rather complimentary. He said that after returning from EuroCAE-

96 he had re-read my book on Aesthetic Perception and a couple of my papers and found them fascinating. He had thought of a neat way of testing the entropic hypothesis (my contribution to the world of science) and would like to discuss it with me. He said he was keen to do an experiment to test my hypothesis and write a paper on it but felt it would be best if I were involved in the project and a co-author of his proposed paper.

I replied saying that I was interested in principle but very busy. I gave him my home address and phone number. That evening he called me at home, told me how pleasant it had been to meet me in Berlin and emphasized again how keen he was to work with me. He told me a little about his idea for an experiment, but kept back some of the details. It was enough for me to realize that he did have a genuine chance of proving, or indeed disproving, my hypothesis. I told him I'd like a few days to consider, but in reality it was a no-brainer: if my hypothesis was under test, I had to be involved. The clincher was that he said he could do nearly all the donkey-work at York as he'd just won a grant from the Educational & Social Research Council. All I'd have to do was help plan the study and write parts of the paper afterwards, including the discussion section.

Two days later I was preparing to send him an email accepting his proposal when I noticed a message from Sonja in my mailbox. She too was quite effusive. She said how nice it had been to meet me and Julian in Berlin. (Well, yes.) How she hoped we might all three meet up again. (Well, yes.) She also apologized profusely for not being in touch earlier because she'd been back to visit her parents in Bratislava for a week and when she returned to her University the computer labs were still closed for the summer vacation and had only just reopened. (You have to remember this was September 1996. People, especially in eastern Europe, couldn't just get internet access wherever they were.)

I immediately sent her a thank-you, saying that I too would be very happy to meet her again, and then composed my acceptance of Julian's proposal.

On 19th November, Julian came down to London to give a talk in my department. I'd arranged for him to be a speaker in our seminar series, and to stay at my house overnight so we could discuss our study. His talk -- nothing to do with our joint research -- went down very well. He insisted on taking me and my wife out for an Italian meal that evening, so we didn't talk much about our investigation. The next day, however, I had a free morning, so when my wife left for work we went to my study and discussed his current plans. This time he explained the details -- how many subjects would be needed, what sort of images they would be shown, how he planned to analyze the data.

I was impressed. I had published my hypothesis twelve years before, always expecting that it would remain just that -- hypothetical -- until brain scanners became cheap enough for impoverished academics. In fact, I had recently had a bid for funding to purchase an NMR imaging device for our labs turned down. Now here was Julian showing me how it could be tested by nothing more complex than having a group of people repeatedly sorting coloured images into piles. It didn't even need a computer -- except that he wanted to record eye-movement data as well, and to make it easier to collect and analyze the data.

"Ingenious," I said.

"You think it will work?"

"It's brilliant. I wish I'd thought of it myself. Whichever way the data come out, we'll have a result worth telling people about."

"You're a real scientist," he said. "You don't mind if the facts refute your theory."

"I mind like hell!" I replied, "but if that does happen, I want to be the one who tells the world. Much less embarrassing that way. I'm grateful to you for inviting me in on this. And for being ready to do so much of the work."

"No problem. Though perhaps I could ask you for a small favour."

"What's that?"

"I'd like to ask your advice."

"About what?"

"Do you remember Sonja?"

"I do indeed."

"She wants me to visit her at Christmas."

"Lucky man!"

"You think I should go?"

"You're not married, are you?"

"No."

"Including, I mean, no live-in partner or whatever."

"No. I'm single."

"Then go for it!"

Julian looked unconvinced.

"Look," I said. "We're both psychologists, so we mess up our personal lives. We can take that as axiomatic. Right?"

He smiled.

"So," I continued, "my advice must come with a health warning. OK?"

"Sure."

"Oh, and I should also add, you know her better than I do."

"But she respects you."

That was news to me.

"She says you are the nicest person she ever met," he went on, "apart from me, that is."

That was also news to me.

"But I spoke with her for less than 10 minutes. You interrupted our only conversation, if you recall."

"She says she can tell in five minutes. She also says your emails have been very helpful."

I took a deep breath. "Look, Julian," I said, "Sonja has sent me some friendly emails, (not that many, as it happens) and I have replied in as friendly and helpful way as I can. I don't know your relationship with Sonja, and I don't really need to, but anyway I'm not your rival. As you have seen here with your own eyes, I'm married."

"No, no. Don't get me wrong. It's fine by me for you to email her. That's up to you and her. It's just that she does seem to value your opinion, and you're the only person I know who knows her."

"So what do you want?"

"As I said, your opinion of Sonja."

"Well, what can I say? She's beautiful. Deep brown eyes. Obviously highly intelligent. Perhaps a shade over-emotional. If I were in your position I'd be booking a flight to Prague at this very moment."

"Thanks," he said.

"But it is your choice."

"I know."

I offered to drive him to Kings Cross station, but he said he'd be perfectly happy taking the tube.

I saw nothing more of Julian in 1996, though we exchanged a couple more emails. On 4th January 1997, however, I received a postcard from Prague wishing me a happy Christmas, written by Julian and signed by him and Sonja.

Julian came down to stay with me for a couple of days over Easter, to look at the data he had gathered. He'd already done most of the analyses, but we ran some more on my computer as well. When we spread the graphs out on the table, I punched the air with delight.

"I was right!"

"No longer the entropic hypothesis," he said, "but the entropic principle. Or should we call it the Lamont principle?"

"We should call it a day! Come on, let's celebrate!"

I bounded out of my study and managed to persuade my wife to quit her homework-marking early. Then I dragged them both out for another Italian meal. This time I paid.

The paper was less than half written by the time Julian took the train back to York. But I sent him a few more paragraphs by email a few days later, which he merged seamlessly into a paper ready for submission two weeks later. It wasn't art in education, so we decided to submit it to the International Association for Perceptual Psychology, who were to hold their annual conference in Paris that year, from 31st August to 3rd September 1997. Once again, Julian handled the practicalities.

He also asked me, in late May, to sign an application form, as second referee, so that Sonja could obtain a travel grant from the Pan-European Cultural Fund to attend the Paris conference as well. That didn't surprise me; though when I found out that he hadn't seen her since his Christmas trip and wasn't planning a summer visit, I was surprised. I sent him some advice (this time unsolicited) to the effect that September was still a long way off.

Saturday, 30th August 1997, found me at Waterloo station waiting to take my first Eurostar trip through the channel tunnel, and waiting for Julian. We had arranged to meet at 11:30 for the 12 noon train. It was now 11:40. I stood on the marbled concourse with shops and bars peeling away from me in a long curve, feeling almost dizzy from the crowds of people

hustling past in both directions. I felt a tap on my shoulder. I turned round to face Julian. We shook hands.

"Hi!"

"Hello!"

"David, let me introduce Stephanie. We're colleagues at York."

I shook hands with Stephanie. Julian had surprised me again.

"I guess we'd better go. Only twenty minutes to departure time."

Stephanie was quite a chunky woman, in her late twenties, with close-cropped blonde hair and green eyes. She wore surprisingly elegant clothes for a UK academic -- cream-coloured trousers and a well-cut cream jacket. First impressions were that she wouldn't suffer fools gladly, but I found her amiable, chatty even, on the journey. It turned out that "colleagues" was somewhat misleading: Stephanie was both part-time lecturer and part-time PhD student, doing research on the effects of musical education on autistic children. Julian was one of Stephanie's PhD supervisors. I wondered if that was the limit of it.

We arrived at Gare du Nord a little late, at 4:30 p.m. local time. We were booked at different hotels. Aged 42, my student-dorm days were finally behind me: this time my University had stumped up for civilized accommodation, a single room in a 3-star hotel. I wondered if Julian's had stumped up for a double room, though my curiosity on that point was not to be satisfied for another 10 hours.

We took RER Line B to Chatelet, where we went our separate ways, agreeing to meet at the Conference Welcoming Reception, which began at 6:30 p.m. in a room of the Musée des Beaux Arts.

Only after parting from Julian and Stephanie did I start to think seriously about Sonja. I had kept in touch with her by email, and we three had arranged to meet at the Welcoming Reception, then go out for a meal and perhaps sample the night life after that. The presentation by Julian and me wasn't scheduled till the afternoon of 2nd September, so that would give time us to recover. I realized that I'd had a chance on the train to ask Julian how Stephanie fitted into this pre-existing plan, when she was in the toilet, but hadn't taken it. Instead, I'd been intent on timing our transit through the tunnel. At 42 years of age! It took 19 minutes and 40 seconds, in case you're interested.

I reached the Musée des Beaux Arts at 6:30 sharp, having found my hotel, unpacked my baggage, had a quick wash and put on a jacket and tie.

It took another 20 minutes to locate the room where the reception was held. The ceiling was high, the chandeliers were gilded, and there were old masters on the walls. No Breugel, however, as far as I could tell. Only about 40 people, from a conference with over 400 delegates, had so far made it. Maybe the complete lack of signs outside or in the corridors had something to do with that.

There was a trestle table covered in a white cloth where three green-jacketed waiters and a waitress wearing pigtails were serving drinks. It was at the back, by a tall shuttered window. I moved over and accepted a glass of white wine, then looked around to see if anyone I knew was present. Stephanie and Julian had beaten me to it, so I went over to join them. About five minutes later, Sonja arrived.

I can still see her, framed in that huge wooden doorway. She wore a pale blue short-sleeved dress that announced she had no need to hide her figure. In her hand was a single dark red rose. She scanned the room for a moment then smiled and walked towards us. As she

approached, she was looking at Julian, radiant with anticipation. When she was about three metres away, her smile wavered for an instant, and her eyes turned to me.

She handed me the rose.

"David, lovely to see you again," she said, and gave me a big hug.

"Julian, so nice to see you again," she said, giving Julian the same hug.

Julian introduced her to Stephanie, his colleague from York University, and the four of us skated smoothly into a conversation about travel, hotels, which big names were attending the conference, and the woeful lack of signs provided by the conference organizers.

I looked at Stephanie, trying to work out whether she was interested in the rose I held in my right hand. I imagined she knew its exact significance. Yet what was its significance? I could only guess.

The reception petered out around 8 p.m. We took a taxi as a foursome to a restaurant near the Rue de Richlieu. There we talked about autism. We talked about the political situation in Slovakia and the Czech Republic. We talked about the entropic principle. Someone even mentioned Dodi Fayed. We consumed two bottles of Burgundy and two of Chablis. By the time we'd settled the bill it was midnight.

Outside, the air was cool. We wandered up towards Montmartre looking for a night club. Julian put his arm round Stephanie's waist. Sonja put her arm around mine. Somebody said -- it must have been Stephanie -- that Montmartre was no good for night clubs -- hadn't been since about 1910 -- and that we should go to the Left Bank. We wandered some more and eventually found the Pigalle Metro station, but it was closed.

"How do we get home from here?" asked Stephanie.

Julian sprang out into the road. He had seen a taxi. He hailed it but it didn't stop. Just behind it, though, was another cab, which did.

Julian held the passenger door open. "Hop in folks!" he said, "we can drop everybody off at their hotels." Stephanie climbed in.

"I want to walk," said Sonja.

"I'll walk too," I said.

"See you tomorrow," said Julian.

"See you tomorrow," I replied. The taxi drove off.

"Thanks. I needed someone to walk and talk with," said Sonja. "You sure you don't mind?"

"Of course I don't mind."

"David, you're a real friend."

I put my arm round her waist again. She removed it and held my hand between us.

"I do mean a real friend," she said.

I squeezed her hand. "Where shall we walk?"

"To the river, I think," she said, and smiled.

Dawn found us at the Pont St Michel watching the sky light up behind the towers of Notre Dame. By this time we had our arms round each other again, for warmth. We were shivering.

As soon as the first café opened, we were in and asking for coffee and croissants. We took a table by the window. When the next customers came in they spoke excitedly with the woman who had served us.

"I think they're talking about Princess Diana," I said.

"They're saying that she's dead," said Sonja. Her French was better than mine. "She's been killed in a road accident."

It was only then that Sonja began to cry. I reached out and took her hand. She went on crying. I moved my chair round and put my arm round her shoulders. She sobbed.

Thus it was that early risers on a pavement in Paris could look in and see me trying to comfort one of the millions of people weeping for a princess cut down before her time.

The serviette at the next table was cleaner than my handkerchief. I gave it to Sonja and she began drying her eyes.

"I'll have to go," Sonja said to me.

"Back to your hostel?" I asked.

"Back to Prague."

"Today?"

She nodded.

"And miss the conference?" I asked.

"And miss the conference."

"And miss my paper -- my paper with Julian?"

"And miss even that."

"I'll come with you to the station."

She looked at me and gave a sad smile. "I don't know what I'd do without you," she said.

We took the Metro back to her hostel. It didn't take her long to get ready. She hadn't really unpacked. We took a taxi to Gare de l'Est. There she paid 40 francs to reschedule her ticket. There were still three hours before her departure. We found a cafe in the station.

"Shall I wait with you?"

"No. You haven't slept all night. You'd better go back to your hotel and get some rest."

"What about you?"

"I'll sleep on the train."

"Goodbye, then. I'll send you an email when I get home."

We hugged. I walked backwards waving, until I bumped into someone. Then I turned and didn't look back.

I didn't go directly to my hotel. I went to the Musée des Beaux Arts. But it was shut. Walking along the riverbank to the nearest Metro stop, I noticed a crowd of people in the Place de l'Alma. I approached and saw that they were laying flowers on a small grassy area above the tunnel where the princess had died. Already a large pile had formed. In my jacket pocket was the rose that Sonja had given me. Its stem was broken, several petals had fallen off, and it was beginning to fade. Nevertheless, I added it to the princess's pile.