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Abstract

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Turtle Mania

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Abstract: This is serious. Turtles live in every nook and cranny of my house—on shelves, in bookcases, on the mantle over the fireplace, in a special cabinet with glass doors that's filled to overcrawling, in the cubbies of my rolltop desk. It all started when I became director of the Cognitive Sciences Center at the University of Minnesota in the late 1970s, and my family discovered that the turtle is the logo of the Center. The first carved turtle, a gift from my wife, came into my life innocently enough, but they have multiplied beyond imagination and the situation has gotten out of control.

Turtles live in every nook and cranny of my house—on shelves, in bookcases, on the mantle over the fireplace, in a special cabinet with glass doors that's filled to overcrawling, in the cubbies of my rolltop desk. I have close to two hundred at last count, from all over the world, made of glass, pewter, crystal, clay, wood, dried seeds, silver, porcelain, plastic, nuts and bolts, pebbles, cardboard. Most can fit in the palm of my hand, but one is large enough to use as a doorstop and some are vanishingly tiny. All are decorative; some are also functional. I have one with holes in the top that I assumed was a pencil caddy until, after several years, I had an uncontrollable urge to blow into it and discovered it's a kind of flute. Others have secret compartments. My granddaughter Elana is especially fond of a silver turtle that's a music box. The green plastic turtle that undulated suggestively across the floor when it was wound up has long since expired.

At first I kept a record of who gave me each turtle, but that eventually proved too burdensome. Now most of them are of uncertain origin. Although I have a large collection, I didn't buy any of them. They were all given to me as gifts. It started in 1978, when I began a five-year term as director of the Cognitive Sciences Center at the University of Minnesota. The center is an interdisciplinary research and training consortium made up of a select group of faculty and advanced graduated students from various departments of the University.

The first director of the center was Professor Jim Jenkins, an experimental psychologist. At the beginning of each year, when the new students arrived, Jenkins would greet them with the same apocryphal story:

It seems that the great psychologist and philosopher William James was giving a public lecture. During the lecture he commented dramatically that even though we live in the midst of a sea of other planets, in

unbounded space, no one knows for certain how the earth remains suspended in the solar system, and why it doesn't fall from the skies and plunge us all into eternal oblivion

When the lecture had ended, an elderly woman accosted the great psychologist and said that she knew why the earth remains suspended in space. "It's because the world is resting snugly on the back of a gigantic turtle."

The professor, who was still basking in the enthusiasm his lecture had provoked, smiled benevolently and said, "That's all very well, madam, but then we are faced with the dilemma of what is holding up the turtle."

"Oh," she said. "It's another turtle."

The professor was becoming a bit irritated by the woman's insistence, but still he responded charitably: "That will get us nowhere, my good woman, because we must then ask what the second turtle is resting on, ad infinitum."

She responded without hesitation, "You don't understand, Professor. It's turtles, all the way down to the bottom."

From the first telling of that anecdote, turtles became the official logo and mascot of the center, and T-shirts with turtles piled one on top of another (or in other configurations) were printed up and proudly worn by the members. When I became director of the center, my wife marked the occasion by giving me a pewter turtle. I was touched but had no notion at the time how rapidly turtles can multiply. From then on I was flooded with turtles, from my wife on every major occasion, from my children on those occasions they remembered, from my students as they returned from the exotic places they had visited over spring break or as they gratefully took leave of the university, from a janitor in my building who, seeing my growing collection, decided to feed this obsession, from children who passed my office on the way to the speech clinic and there crafted turtles of wood or paper or paper clips, and from strangers who never identified themselves but mysteriously left turtles on my desk.

I long ago lost control of the turtle population. I have announced to family members that the time has come to think more carefully about what to buy me on birthdays or Father's Day. I have called various local stores and warned them that my wife suffers from "turtle-mania," and that they could be perpetuating a deep-seated disturbance by encouraging or even allowing her to buy a turtle should she appear in their shop. I have pushed my wife out of gift shops just as she was reaching for another magnificent example of the myriad ways a turtle can be rendered, only to discover that she later sneaked back and had a surprise for me when we returned home. I have spoken as forcefully on the subject as good manners and decorum would allow, but still the turtles have been fruitful and multiplied.

It is not quite accurate to suggest that these mute replicas are the first turtles to have been introduced into my life. When my children were young we had the usual experience with painted turtles in fish tanks that too soon became their burial grounds. None lasted more than a few days, probably because we couldn't curb the solicitous concern of our three small children.

There is another turtle tale that has gone into the folklore of our family. Many years ago, when my mother came to visit us from New York, we all went for an outing to the Como Zoo in St. Paul. After walking in and out of numerous exhibitions, my weary mother sat down for a moment on one of two large carved turtles that had been placed invitingly at the entrance to the cat house. Suddenly the statue heaved itself up and lumbered a few steps forward before again freezing into immobility. The turtles were ancient, huge--and alive! If turtles can hear, that poor creature and its mate suffered a permanent hearing loss from the shrieks of terror from my mother, and of glee from my children.

For many years I kept most of my turtle collection in a cabinet at my university office. Occasionally students from distant lands would notice the collection and would comment on the symbolism of turtles in their native countries. It was an occasion for cultural edification. In many places, it was traditionally believed that the world sits on the back of a gigantic turtle, as in the James story; turtles are also indicators of long life, wisdom, or fertility. In the spring of 1997, when I retired from the university after thirty-six years on the faculty, colleagues presented me with a gift in a large, heavy box. I opened it with a frozen smile on my face, fearing it would be the mother of all turtles, the one the university, if not the universe, rests on. I was thoroughly relieved to find it was instead a beautiful vase created by the world-class potter Warren MacKenzie, who was also retired from the University of Minnesota.

A lovely gift. But when I got home I found that the place where I intended to display my new pottery was already occupied by a piece of furniture. My ever thoughtful wife had arranged to obtain the old cabinet from my university office that had housed all my turtles. Now I could display them at home. And the truly good news, my wife informed me, was that I would also have room for the new turtles I would undoubtedly want to collect, especially now that I had so much time to search for the little treasures.