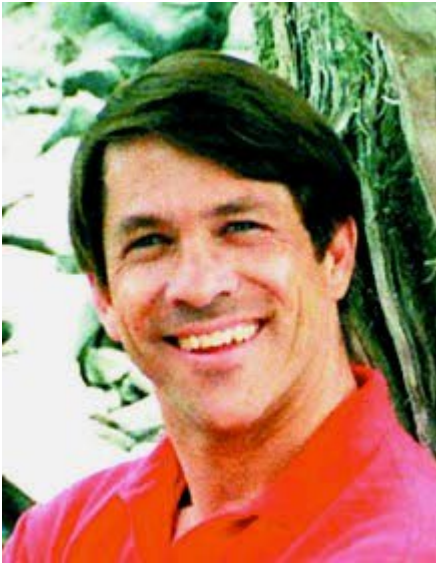


HIS VIEW: Chutzpah of chumming children into church

By William Brock

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Brock

Like most parents, I'm leery of strangers approaching my children with offers of ice cream. So I was paying attention last week when three people walked up to my kids and me at a local park.

"Do you want ice cream?" they asked. Turns out my children, ages 2 and 5, did want some ice cream.

"Do you want stickers?" the strangers asked. "Do you like to play games?"

These strangers were perky teenage girls, so my Weirdo-at-the-Park alarm wasn't going off. One of them was wearing a crucifix big enough to clobber a Rottweiler, so I had a fair idea where their philanthropy was heading.

"Are you part of a group?" I asked.

Turns out they were members of a local evangelical church.

"We are secure in our faith," I said. "I hope that's not a problem."

No, no it wasn't a problem. After a minute or two, they wandered off in search of other ice cream-starved souls to befriend.

Although I'm a curmudgeon, it takes more than an incident like that to ruin my day. It was a simple and blessedly short conversation with three girls who looked like they belonged in a toothpaste commercial.

I suspect our conversation would have taken a different - and far more intrusive - tack had I not made my announcement.

By accepting their hospitality, the conventions of polite society would have obliged us to chat pleasantly while my kids ate their ice cream bars. I'm guessing a conversation with those girls would have touched on finger-painting, feeding the ducks and, oh, maybe Jesus Christ Almighty.

I don't know about you, but I'm not interested in having a Socratic dialogue with strangers about my family's spiritual beliefs, be they atheist or Zoroastrian. Ain't nobody's business but my own.

Seen through the generous lens of my bi-focals, the ice cream girls were being kind-hearted and friendly. Seen through my less-generous lens, these girls - children themselves - were trying to chum new recruits into their church. And what do new recruits bring to church? In addition to energy and enthusiasm, they bring \$5 and \$10 bills for the collection basket.

Some of that money may go to further the church's good work, and some of it may go to reupholster the pastor's Porsche. If you don't believe me, ask a few of Jim Bakker's, or Jimmy Swaggart's, or Ted Haggard's former congregants.

The world is full of hustlers, with magazine salesmen at my door, credit card come-ons in the mail and robocalls on my phone. Fairly or not, I lump evangelicals in with other worldly annoyances.

Don't get me wrong, this is not a criticism of religion. In this world of constant sorrow, I don't begrudge anyone the succoring comfort of faith. I'm just skeptical of any spiritual belief system that requires sales associates. After all, the best products are the ones that sell themselves.

That thought struck me recently as I was unlocking my bicycle outside of a Moscow coffeehouse. Two middle-aged men were talking about a third person when one of them declared, "He's going to make a good little evangelist someday."

And why not? With grown-ups whispering in his ear, that little fella could become a top-producing evangelist.

So I encourage him to think big.

Don't market your product here on the Palouse, which is like shooting fish in a barrel. Save your Savior sales pitch for Afghanistan, where you can convert dangerous Islamic extremists. Then head down to India and convince all them Hindus they are praying to the wrong god(s). After that, go to China and get all them Buddhists thinking straight.

Think big, son, really big.

In the meantime, don't waste your time on churlish old heretics like me. Or my kids, whom I'm teaching to think critically and demand evidence whenever someone purports to have the answers to life's eternal questions.

William Brock lives in Pullman with his wife and children.