

Soda Machine Pyramid Meltdown

Have you ever had difficulty distinguishing fact from fiction? Have you awakened from a dream and had a hard time assuring yourself that it hadn't happened? If you've taken pain medication, have you had such vivid dreams that you were convinced that they really happened?

This happened to me over a period of several days in the summer of 2003 when a student at the Institute for Creation Research Graduate School (ICR) was visiting the campus in San Diego to complete the research for a master's Degree. He was a professional microscopist by trade and was interested in installing an electron microscope he had recently purchased in the ICR lab for use by him and the faculty.

I became involved in the decision to grant him permission to locate the microscope at ICR. I had developed a few reservations about the arrangement. The Academic Dean of the Graduate School, and the student's major professor, was excited about having the microscope on campus and was developing support for the idea among the faculty and staff.

During negotiations I had been experiencing headaches every morning for several months. The headaches had become so bad that I had resorted to drinking a can of Pepsi or Root Beer from the vending machine in the lunchroom most mornings. The caffeine and sugar seemed to give me a boost in energy and relieved my headaches. However, a side effect was that the soda caused me to get sleepy around noon and frequently dose off and have daydreams at my desk or in the lunchroom. The headaches continued to get worse and began to return in the afternoon when the caffeine and sugar had worn off, so I began drinking a second soda later in the day.

I knew something wasn't right but couldn't figure out what. The cycle of tiredness, headache, soda, energy boost, sleepiness, another headache, and a second soda near the end of the day was beginning to tell on me.

During the week of discussions about the student's microscope, I was eating in the lunchroom alone when the student came in and sat down to have lunch.

After a few minutes of conversation, he commented on the condensation he saw on the outside of my can of Pepsi.

He said, "That's not good. It looks like your Pepsi's leaking. ICR might have a case of Soda Machine Pyramid Meltdown."

"What?", I said.

" Soda Machine Pyramid Meltdown!", he replied.

"You're kidding", I said. "What in the world is that?"

"Have you ever looked inside a vending machine?", he asked.

" No", I said.

"Well, if you open the door you'll see that the soda cans are loaded in a rack that the cans roll down. The rack is pyramid-shaped. The cans are stacked in rows that are wide at the bottom and narrow near the top. If a can of soda near the top is defective, the fluid will leak out and drip onto the cans in the lower part of the rack. The acid in the soda will eat away the metal coating on the cans below and cause them to begin leaking as well!"

"Really," I said.

"Yes," he replied. "Did you know that Coca Cola makes a great cleaning agent? It can be used to wash road tar and grime off your car. It's so corrosive that if you leave a tooth in a glass of Coca Cola overnight, it will completely dissolve."

"No, I didn't know that."

"Well, it's true. You need to get that machine fixed. I'd call up the soda distributor and have him come out immediately and either fix the machine or exchange it for a new one!"

"OK. I'll look into that," I said.

"Good, because if you don't, your entire vending machine is likely to rust away from the acid spilling from the cans!"

When the student left the lunchroom, I remained behind and considered what he had said. The whole idea of a Soda Machine Pyramid Meltdown sounded so bizarre that I couldn't imagine that it was true. I'd never heard of anything like that! But, it did make sense. I knew that Coca Cola was acidic, and that people had said it could be used to clean grime off your car. And, if you drank too many cokes, your teeth would rot. So, maybe he was right.

I didn't feel like taking the time to call the soda distributor, so I decided to talk to our office manager about it. After all, dealing with the vending machine wasn't my job. The office manager dealt with that sort of thing, didn't she?

When I finished lunch, I dropped by the office manager's desk and told her about the conversation I had just had with the student. She looked at me rather skeptically when I repeated the phrase, Soda Machine Pyramid Meltdown, but agreed to talk to the delivery man about the problem the next time he came in to service the machine.

That night when I was having dinner at home I told my wife, Jeannette, about the strange conversation I had with the student at lunch. She listened patiently but was looked quizzically at me and appeared skeptical of the story. She particularly questioned me about the phrase, Soda Machine Pyramid Meltdown. What is a pyramid, what is a meltdown, and why does soda from one can dissolve the others?

And, she perceptively asked, "If the soda drips from a can leaking at the top of the pyramid, wouldn't it take quite a while for a can at the bottom of the machine to be damaged?"

I didn't have an answer to all her questions and I had doubts myself, but I returned to work the next day confident that our office manager would sort the problem out with the delivery man. What I didn't expect was for Jeannette to stop by the office and talk with the office manager.

Jeannette had listened to my discussion the previous evening and decided things didn't quite add up. My wife is a psychiatric nurse and is very perceptive about a person's emotional state. She's also very careful not to reveal suspicions or

concerns. I had told Jeannette I had talked with the office manager, so she decided to get her perspective.

The office manager told Jeannette that the story I had relayed to her was bogus, and she didn't intend to involve the delivery man. She went on to say that, "All of us here in the front office highly respect your husband, and we know that you love your husband very much so, if he wants to believe that ICR has a Soda Machine Pyramid Meltdown problem, we'll just go along with it and support him."

Nobody said anything to me about this conversation, but the next week when I inquired of the office manager if she had talked to the delivery man, she said no, she hadn't seen him. I suggested she might want to call him if it was going to be some time before he returned. Later the same week I again talked with the student briefly in the lunchroom, and he asked if I had gotten in touch with the soda distributor. I told him, no, not yet, he hadn't come in to service the vending machine yet this week.

The student became very agitated and said, "Well, if you're not going to take care of it, I will. This is a crisis and we can't let any more time go by." He then walked briskly out of the room as if he was going to deal with it immediately.

I was shocked by his response to this, "Tempest in a Teapot." First, I couldn't figure out why it was such a crisis. Second, I couldn't understand why a graduate student would take it upon himself to solve a problem that didn't concern him. Thirdly, I was having more doubts about the legitimacy of this, so-called, "Soda Machine Pyramid Meltdown." And, finally, I decided I needed to talk with our Academic Dean. I had concluded that his student was not trustworthy and ICR should not finalize the arrangement for installing his microscope in the labs.

I met with the Dean later that day and expressed my concerns. He was surprised at the reasons I presented, particularly the issue about the, Soda Machine Pyramid Meltdown. He graciously accepted my input, but it was clear he had serious reservations about my concerns and asked me to wait until he spoke to his student.

The next day I happened to run into the delivery man who was reloading the vending machine. I asked him if our office manager had talked with him about fixing the machine.

He said, "No, what's wrong with it?"

I responded, "Well, one of our students thinks we have, Soda Machine Pyramid Meltdown."

"What! Your student has a nut loose," and continued filling the vending machine.

That evening I had another conversation with Jeannette at home. She informed me about her conversation with the office manager the previous week in which the office manager said she had ignored my concerns about the soda machine and didn't bother to contact the delivery man. This seemed strange to me. Why had my request been dropped?

The next day I went to see the Dean again to determine where he was on the decision to use his student's microscope. He informed me that he had decided to have it installed the next week. He also told me that in his discussions with his student, he had denied ever having had a conversation with me about a Soda Machine Pyramid Meltdown and had never heard of such a thing.

I was stunned! I couldn't believe it. He denied the entire episode? It took me a few moments to recover. And, then I realized, this is even worse. Now he's lying! If he would lie about his conversation with me, there's no way we should do business with him. I tried to convince the Dean that his student was unreliable and a liar, and that ICR should not close the deal. But, the Dean was unmoved.

Later that afternoon, I was taken by ambulance to Grossmont Hospital in San Diego. It appeared that I may have suffered a stroke and was admitted to the emergency room and put through a series of tests. The doctors determined that I had Bell's Palsy, a condition which mimics a stroke, but is generally less serious. The right side of my face had drooped, and I was experiencing numbness on the right side of my body.

The primary cause was determined to be extremely high blood sugar from a case of undiagnosed diabetes. My blood sugar was measured at over 500 when I was first admitted to the hospital and had probably been higher during the lunchtimes when I had been overdosing on sugar and caffeine. It now became clear why I had been falling asleep at lunch and daydreaming so much. It was also clear what the true cause of the Soda Machine Pyramid Meltdown was. The entire episode had been manufactured in my head. The Dean's student hadn't prompted a crisis at ICR, my sugar-saturated brain had.

The doctors at Grossmont Hospital put me on a regimen of Steroids and Metformin for the week I spent, "in stir". The Steroids helped repair the damage to my neurological system and the Metformin controlled my blood sugar. One interesting side effect of the Steroids was an incredible increase in energy and alertness for the week. I paced the halls and couldn't sit still. No wonder athletes like Steroids! They make you feel like Superman.

This occurrence of Bell's Palsy was only one in a series of serious medical emergencies I've had, but the Lord has been good. He continues to preserve me today after several even more serious challenges. However, it took me several years to fully recover from the loss of contact with reality I experienced during the Soda Machine Pyramid Meltdown incident.

I realized that I had lost my grip on reality during the period my blood sugar was out of control. But, I was astounded at how detailed the scenario my brain had painted. The fact that I had imagined complex conversations with the student which seemed logical at the time was literally, "mind blowing". And, the detail of the internal workings of the vending machine, that I had little prior knowledge of, was incredible. Even more fascinating was the fact that when I was under the influence of "demon sugar", I couldn't distinguish fact from fiction.

Since the saga of the Soda Machine Pyramid Meltdown I've had two additional incidents which have made me question my sanity. The first involved drugs taken following surgery for colon cancer and the second, waking up from a sound sleep to watch a television documentary about an historical event I didn't know of.

I was administered Dilaudid for about a week after major abdominal surgery and experienced extremely vivid dreams during the nights. Upon awaking several mornings after heavy doses, it took me several hours each day to convince myself the images in the night were dreams. Even after I was able to convince myself they were dreams, I was prompted to share them with my family and friends because they were so detailed and unique. Even today they remain clear in my memory, but I can now recognize them for the dreams they were.

In the second case of waking to a television documentary, it took me longer to assure myself that what I had viewed was fact and not fiction. About a month after I recovered from Bell's Palsy and my delusions about the Soda Machine Pyramid Meltdown, I awoke from a sound sleep in the middle of the night to find I had left the television on. A documentary was playing about the construction of the Alaska/Canadian (Alcan) Highway during WWII. It told how an all-black regiment of Army soldiers was assigned to build a highway from the US, across Canada, to Alaska during a period of nine months in the dead of Winter. The highway was needed to transport troops and supplies to Alaska to stop a potential Japanese invasion along the Alaska Peninsula into the US.

I had never heard this story before and was fearful that I was having a relapse of my delusions earlier in the month. Yet, the documentary seemed plausible and appeared fully documented. Since it was early in the morning and no one was awake yet, I could not inquire if the story was true. I remained awake with some trepidation the remainder of the morning until I could talk with someone who might know about the story.

By midmorning I was able to talk with Jeannette and call several friends to ask if anyone had heard if the Alcan Highway had been built during WWII by a regiment of black soldiers to prevent the Japanese from invading the US. Jeannette and the first few friends I called had never heard this story. My fear increased that I was having another delusion. Was I losing my mind again? Was this the first stage of Alzheimer's disease?

Finally, after calling four friends who knew nothing about the story, the fifth thought he vaguely remembered something about the highway to Alaska being built quickly. Then he suggested the solution to my problem--look on the Internet!

Of course, why hadn't I thought of that? I quickly located several articles online that confirmed many of the same facts I had heard in the documentary--the Army had assigned a brigade of black soldiers to build a road through the ice and snow of Canada to Alaska in nine months to stave off a possible invasion of the US by the Japanese.

What a relief! Maybe I was sane after all. But, could I trust the Internet? It's known to be full of false information. Could my mind still be playing tricks on me? I continued to scour the Internet and talk with others I knew were reliable. The more documentation I found, the more it supported the truth of the story and the heroic actions these men took to build the road and protect our country. Finally, I began to relax and believe the story.

But, it took several years to fully regain confidence that I could discern fact from fiction. Even yet today, if I haven't had enough sleep or I've had too much sugar, I will be cautious about reaching a conclusion until I've given more time for certainty or I've talked with Jeannette. She's a great sounding board.

May I offer a few final thoughts on the topic of discerning fact from fiction? I now have a much greater appreciation for those who suffer from neuroses, psychoses, chemical imbalances, chemical dependencies, and Alzheimer's Disease. I've been there. I've experienced the confusion, the fear, and the loss of connection with reality. Fortunately, my disorientation was not severe and was temporary. But, what about those who do experience severe and permanent disconnection?

I suggest we need to be more understanding and supportive. Unless the person is violent, give them extra time to sort out what is real and what is not. Ask leading questions, rather than making pronouncements. In other words, be their friend and treat them like you would want to be treated. And, the next time you get a headache, skip the Pepsi!!