

Bill Rea ? Remembering O.J. after 20 years

How time flies!

Case in point ? Think back 20 years this past Saturday (Oct. 3). Do you remember where you were at about noon ? this time zone? I was in my car cruising about the streets of East York, which is where I was working in those days. I wasn't going anywhere. I just wanted to listen to the radio without being disturbed. I frequently do that when there's something I want to hear and I don't want to be interrupted with phone calls or people trying to talk to me.

What I wanted to hear was the verdict in the O.J. Simpson murder trial. According to Wikipedia, I was one among some 100 million people who did the same thing. According to the same source, an estimated \$480 million was lost in productivity from people stopping what they were doing to hear the verdict live (somebody actually gets paid to keep statistics like that).

I had already made up my mind on what the verdict was going to be, and I was anxious for confirmation that I'm actually as smart as I like to think I am.

I remember that it had been announced the previous afternoon that a verdict had been reached, after about four hours of deliberation. You will also recall that the trial judge, Lance Ito, had decreed the verdict would not be announced until the following morning, Los Angeles time (about noon our time).

Now I have very little in the way of legal training. I took a course in international law in university, and quite enjoyed it. But the thought of going to law school never occurred to me, and I doubt very much that I would have ever been a success at it. I've also never sat on a jury, and all indicators tell me people in my line of work are seldom picked to be on such a body.

But I have seen and read some details on how the judicial system works in this part of the world (granted, there are differences between the way things are handled in the United States and Canada).

Remember there were two victims in this murder case: Nicole Brown Simpson and Ron Goldman. There would have had to be a lot of debate to decide if Simpson was guilty of one of those murders, and since there were two victims, that timeline would have been roughly doubled. And then the jury would have had to decide if it was first-degree murder, second-degree, etc.

Based on my admittedly amateur viewpoint, I figured it would have been impossible to come up, in that case, with a verdict other than acquittal in such a brief period.

As history has clearly recorded, I was absolutely right.

Although I was curious about the verdict, I was never obsessed with the trial, as I know a lot of people were. It was on TV, and a lot of people with time on their hands watched it constantly. There were a couple of times when the coverage was stopped, largely because Ito had thrown some kind of hissy-fit, but beyond that, it was continuous.

I happened to be home one afternoon during the trial, and turned on the coverage, out of curiosity, if nothing else. I watched a couple of minutes, but quickly became bored.

I was aware of the trial, listened to talk radio go over it at length. The station I regularly listen to (it was called CFRB in those days) even had a legal expert based in L.A., who was on offering expert commentary every evening, and I listened to it if I happened to be in my car at the time.

Total strangers were talking about it. I was eating in restaurant one evening, flipping through a magazine as I ate (either Time or Newsweek). My server noticed I was reading an article about Simpson, and she struck up a conversation with me.

?I don't think he did it,? she said. ?Do you? I don't think so.?

I honestly replied that I didn't know. I still don't, although I have my suspicions. More about that later.

The simple fact is that workaholics like me are too busy to worry about things like murder trials, unless I happen to be covering them. I just couldn't find a local angle in this case, so I focused most of my attention on matters of more immediate concern.

But since I was awake for most hours of the day in those days, I was getting my fill of information about the trial, whether I wanted it or not. And as time went on, it became clear there was one issue in the trial that had fallen off the table, and that was whether or not Simpson actually committed these murders.

Kind of a crucial issue, don't you think?

As I stated above, I don't know whether Simpson is a murderer who got away with it or not. The concept that a person is innocent until it has been proven beyond reasonable doubt in the proper forum (a court of law, with the verdict from a jury of peers) that he or she is guilty is a basic fundamental in our society, and one I have always believed in. No matter how horrific the crime, or how obvious the guilt of the accused might be, the presumption of innocence must stand in the face of all opposition. We have absolutely no business calling this a free society if we are prepared to settle for anything less.

Indeed, as things were gearing up for the trial, a prominent resident of East York had approached me for permission to write a piece

in my paper, expressing her views on the Simpson case. I raised no objections to a prominent local citizen commenting on a topical issue, provided she remember that Simpson must be presumed innocent. I never saw that piece.

Thus once the jury proclaimed Simpson to be 'not guilty,' the concepts in which I have believed all my life demanded that I accept the fact that Simpson didn't do it.

Yet how many times have people been convicted of terrible crimes, eventually to have those judgments reversed. The problem is there is little in the way of effective mechanisms for dealing with people who have been wrongly acquitted.

The fact is I don't know if Simpson is a murderer. But I do know there is considerable room for doubt.

The late Vincent Bugliosi, the man who successfully prosecuted Charles Manson, wrote a book and appeared in a documentary about the Simpson case.

Bugliosi, who died earlier this year, pulled very few punches when it came to proclaiming his belief that Simpson's trial was marred by extremely stupid jurors, incompetent prosecutors and a performance from Judge Ito that left a lot to be desired. His emphatic conclusion was that Simpson got away with two murders.

We all know there have been some very well documented cases of people who were convicted of terrible crimes who were subsequently found to be not guilty. It stands to reason, therefore, that the reverse is equally possible.

Is that the case with Simpson?

We, unfortunately, will never know

