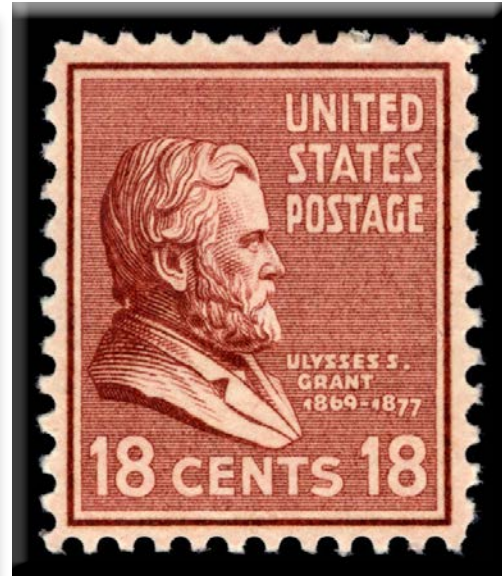


Searching for 518

by Ben Curtis, ASPE



Our foursome was again assembled for breakfast at our club on a rainy Saturday morning. I arrived last, due to getting pulled over by a traffic cop just after I got on the freeway.

“Do you know why I pulled you over?” asked the grizzled-looking officer.

“I may have been speeding down the on-ramp,” I said. “But I was just trying to gain a position in traffic.”

“I’m just going to give you a warning,” he said, looking at my license. “Try to go a little slower next time.”

I felt grateful that I hadn’t given him the old story that ends with “... my wife ran off with a patrolman, and I just thought you were trying to give her back.” Sometimes I know when to keep my mouth shut.

When I got to our table, Cord Schmidt was in the middle of a story. “Give me a synopsis of what I have missed,” I said. “It sounds like a puzzle.”

“Well, as you know, my son is a homicide detective in Seattle,” Cord explained. “He and his wife came down to visit Sunday, and he was deeply troubled. He had this murder case that was driving him and his partner crazy. It involved a man that had been shot in the chest; and before he died, he had used his own blood to write the numbers 5, 1, and what looked like a partial 8, but he died before he could finish it. When I asked my son what he thought the numbers meant, he said, ‘We have tried to come up with anything. For instance, we know who the Pope was in 518. We checked the Bible for the 5th chapter, 18th verse in both the New and Old Testaments—nothing. We checked phone numbers and addresses of possible suspects—no dice.’”

Cord continued, “So, I asked my son to tell me everything he could about the dead man. What he told me was that the dead man owned a hobby shop that specialized in stamps and coins. He had a wife and two kids who were both grown, and nothing really seemed to be a problem. It didn’t seem like anyone who knew him would want to hurt him. My son asked me what I thought. I

pondered it for a while, and then I remembered the principle Friar Ockham came up with back in the 14th century. Today, it's called Occam's Razor, which simply means that the simplest answer to a problem is usually the best."

"I may not have told you guys this before," Cord expounded, "but when I was 10 years old, my neighbor got me interested in collecting US stamps. Before long, I was a whiz at American history and geography. As a matter of fact, when my sixth-grade teacher said the 14th President was Taylor, I raised my hand and said it was Pierce. She gave me the bent eye, and I learned that it was not a good idea to prod authority. Anyway, I asked my son, 'Is one of the suspects named Grant?' He looked at me in astonishment and demanded how I came up with that name. I just said, 'Could his first name be Monroe? And if it is, he's your killer.'"

We all asked, "How could you possibly know that?"

"I'll get to that," said Cord. "Several days later, my son called and said the case was closed, and they had the killer behind bars."

"Okay, Cord," Jim Black cried. "Let's cut to the chase. Quit fooling around."

"I must say, you boys have a terrible lack of patience," Cord teased. "Here's how I figured it out. It's just happenstance the killer had presidents' names for both his first and last names, which is not extremely rare, but it is unusual. When experts tell you how to remember a name, they all tell you to associate the name with something that is already in your brain. The list of the presidents fills that bill because it's long enough—it had to go at least 18 names long. And if you had worked with these names when the tapes were still relatively clean in your brains, you would have remembered them a long time. Monroe was the 5th President, and Grant was the 18th."

"With luck like that," I said, "you should go up to Seattle and get a job with the police."

"It's not luck," Cord smiled. "Besides, that would mean I couldn't play poker with you pigeons anymore, and I couldn't stand to take a cut in pay." Ω

*"The world belongs to those who set out
to conquer it armed with
self-confidence and good humor."*

—Charles Dickens