

WOMANSPACE

Parallel processing.

BY ED RYBICKI

You'd never think that all it took was two middle-aged men, sent shopping by the wife of one to buy knickers, to crack the biggest discovery in modern physics.

It was very simple: I'd been staying with my friend Russell in Canberra, trying to sort out how we were going to get our book on virus structure together, when Russell's wife Lilia decided that their youngest daughter needed new school knickers. She was too busy making supper to bother; these otherwise unemployed elderly men were the perfect candidates — and the prospect of not having to listen to us blather on about just where to pitch the book, and what to put in it, and which Jethro Tull albums we liked, probably tipped the balance our way. Seeing as we could continue to do all those things in a car and in the supermarket — and do a side trip to drool over new electronic goodies in Harvey Norman — we agreed with alacrity.

And so it was, that after a most satisfying comparison shop of iMacs versus the rest, and a cruise through rock nostalgia in the shape of special-offer CDs, we found ourselves in a large supermarket, trawling for girls' knickers.

At this point I must digress, and mention, for those who are not aware, the profound differences in strategy between Men Going Shopping and Women Going Shopping. In any general shopping situation, men *hunt*: that is, they go into a complex environment with a few clear objectives, achieve those, and leave. Women, on the other hand, *gather*: such that any mission to buy just bread and milk could turn into an extended foraging expedition that also snares a to-die-for pair of discounted shoes; a useful new mop; three sorts of new cook-in sauces; and possibly a selection of frozen fish.

And the interesting thing is — and this is what sparked the discovery — that any male would be very hard pressed to say where she got some of these things, even if he accompanied her.

Have you never had the experience of talking to your significant female other as you wend your way through the complexity of a supermarket — only to suddenly find her 20 metres away with her back to you? And then she comes back with something



you've never seen before, and tosses it in the trolley as if nothing has happened?

I know I have — and until recently, I had always assumed it was just me not noticing new things in the aisles we were walking through.

So there we were, looking for knickers, and a rather wary woman asked if she could help, given that we looked lost and hopeless. Russell explained to her exactly what we were looking for, and her wariness seemed to become mild alarm, until we hastened to reassure her that this was in fact a commission for the mother of said child. She then said, with what seemed to be great satisfaction, "Oh, no; you'll never find those in here — you'll have to go down to [some remote location]," which we had no chance of achieving before they closed, so the whole mission was now a failure.

It was as we trudged our forlorn way back to the car that Russell said: "You know, I'm sure we've found them there before — at least, Lilia has."

I said, only half-joking: "Well, women seem to be able to do that — maybe they're getting into spaces we poor guys can't?"

That was the catalyst: suddenly, we Hunters had an insight into how real Gatherers operated, sparked by our own hopelessness and some considerable acquaintance with the formidable talents of wives when it comes to finding things, and enough science (and science fiction)

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background to be able to appreciate that parallel universes were quite a reasonable answer to a

number of important questions. Including, it seemed, supermarket shopping.

Oh, we were roundly scorned when we got back, knickerless; both for the lack of same, and for our absurd idea — which smacked of desperate snatching at straws to excuse incompetence, to the astrophysics-qualified wife. However, we persevered: we talked it through exhaustively, even conquering problems like:

"What happens when you take some item from another universe to the checkout — when they won't recognize the barcode?" Except they do — electronic systems are quantum-computing devices in their ability to access stock codes, and when they don't, then it's invariably a woman who gets sent to look for them, and they, of course, find them ...

And there it might have sat, had it not been for the Internet. We simply put the idea up in as many forums as we could access; we blogged on it; we talked to everyone we knew (well, male, obviously) who could be relied on to observe such phenomena — and slowly, the observations came in.

Then, of course, there was arguing about significance, and power of the statistical methods used, and it all got usurped by some theoretical physicists the moment it started to look as though there was something in it.

But the answer is clear: women can access parallel universes in order to find things, whether they do it consciously or not. They have probably always been able to do this, and now there is fierce speculation as to whether this constituted the evolutionary advantage we had over other primates: the presence of bulbs, grains and nuts on the table that had been retrieved from parallel universes when the hunters came home empty-handed was probably a major factor in the survival of our species.

The difference is that now they know that they can do it — and things have changed.

Because groceries aren't all they go looking for. It turns out the next item on the shopping list is better-looking versions of us.

Russell and I no longer communicate. And we're very lonely. ■

Ed Rybicki swears that at least some of this is a true story. The part about Russell Kightley and the knickers, anyway.

JACEY