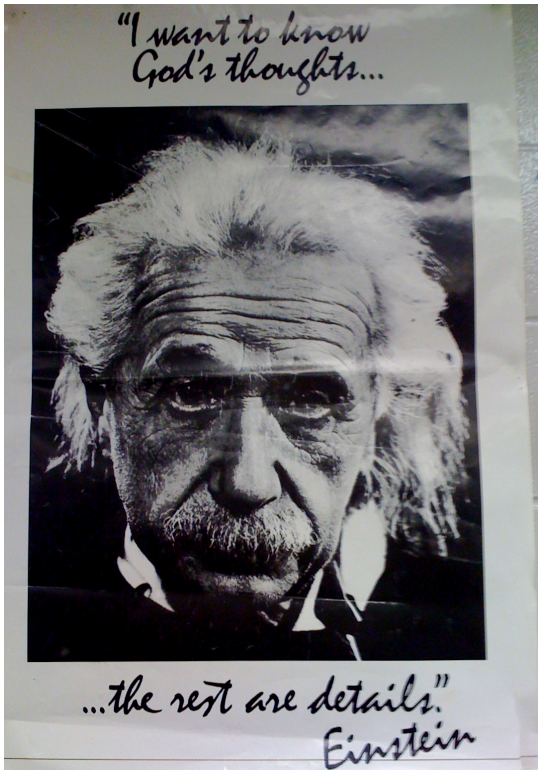

I was at an open house at my oldest son's middle school tonight, and I saw this poster. There is much debate over Einstein's beliefs, and though it seems clear from his writings that he was not a Christian or practicing Jew, he did proffer quotes about "God" fairly often, and these are widely used by religious groups today. The full quote:

I want to know how God created this world. I am not interested in this or that phenomenon, in the spectrum of this or that element; I want to know his thoughts; the rest are details.

This particular quote is intriguing, because I cannot find a definitive source for it. He supposedly said it to a young student, in the context of some experiment or other.

But what did he mean by it?

Einstein claimed to believe in Spinoza's God , which is basically "nature." This is an impersonal God, who has no more regard for humans than for birds, bacteria, or boulders. For Einstein though, this "god" was a puzzle for him to figure out. He wanted to learn what nature was, take it apart, determine how it was put together and why. Taken in this light, he was simply saying

something akin to "I don't care about rainbows, I care about why they exist."

But now we have to consider the poster. Who put it on the wall, and why? I'm not a fan of knee-jerk atheists who cry foul at every mention of god or religion, but this poster bothers me. It shows a picture of someone regarded as one of the smartest people ever to have existed, saying that he wants to know "God's thoughts" without any context whatsoever. It would be very easy to interpret that poster as meaning "I don't care about science, I just care about what God wants from us." And that is NOT what Einstein meant. In my search on this quote (which varies from site to site), I found it often used on Christian sites to back up their god-claims. I don't think Einstein would approve.

I'm sure some of you are thinking that I should complain to the school, but I'm not going to. Instead, I'm going to have a talk with my son about Einstein and what he thought. Once he has the context, he can make up his own mind about whether he appreciates the man or not. I will also encourage him to ask the teacher questions about it, should he have any.

I believe more good can be done by educating people than by simply protesting something like this. It may be a minority opinion, but having a "god" litmus test merely divides us. Giving knowledge and planting questions can do more good, and I hope that's what my actions will lead to.

Besides, once you know the context, the quote raises interesting questions about why we're doing science. I think it's fine to see a rainbow as beautiful phenomenon AND a technical display of natural optics. Einstein seems to be only interested in the latter. This is his loss, but it's also our gain as his dedication to this principle gave us all knowledge. I think it would be better if we focused on that rather than rage at perceived injustice.