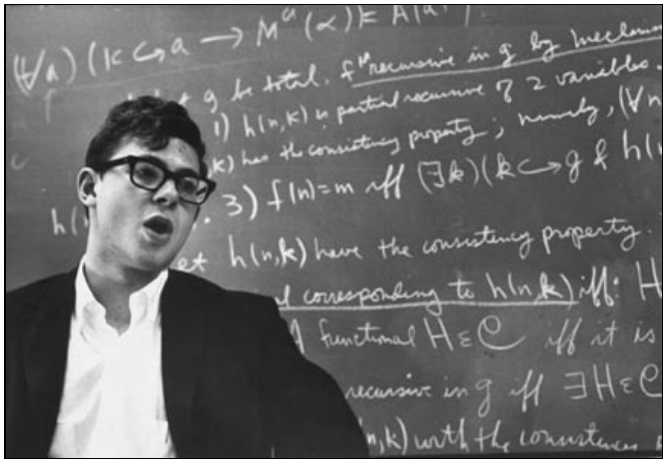
On Research...

Blogging about research issues at Ohio State University

Flashbacks aren't all bad . . .

Posted on May 13th, 2009 by earleholland



I traveled back in time this week – just over 25 years and one month, to be precise.

Reading Tuesday's story in the *Columbus Dispatch* did it, sent me reeling into a place I usually try to avoid. The story announced an international conference, set at Ohio State, that would honor the career of mathematician Harvey Friedman.

For four days, the paper said, "mathematicians, professors, musicians, philosophers and scientists will discuss such subjects as absolute infinity, transducers, axiomatic theories of truth and empirical Platonism," and Harvey will bask in it all.

When he arrived at Ohio State as a full professor in math in 1977, he already had gained fame a decade earlier as the country's youngest professor, according to the Guinness Book of World Records, because of his appointment at Stanford. Luring him here had been a real coup.

My phone rang one day early in 1984. Jack Renirie, the chief public information officer for the National Science Foundation was calling to ask a favor. NSF had selected Friedman to receive the agency's Alan T. Waterman Award, one of its highest honors and given to rising stars in research who were younger than 35. While drafting a news release for the award, one of his staffers had struck out in trying to understand the research Harvey was doing. Would I take a crack at it, he asked.

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I hadn't met Friedman at the time but I knew he was a year younger than me and was already a world-renowned scholar. And mathematics and I had seldom been friends in the past. (Had that not been so, I might have succeeded as a chemical engineer rather than as a science writer.)

I agreed to Renirie's request and scheduled an afternoon interview a day or so later. Harvey was gracious and energetic and, after a bit of small talk to warm up, the interview started.

For science writers beginning discussions with researchers, this is the crux moment. To understand the studies at issue, the researcher and writer usually begin a somewhat disjointed dance as they seek common ground, a baseline on which to build the conversation. In some cases, it is seamless and takes seconds.

In my case with Harvey, it was endless. I was seeking a reasonable explanation of what his work entailed – something that non-scholars could vaguely understand and defeat their often strong phobias against math.

He would begin with a point and I would have to stop him for translation and clarification. I would offer an interpretation of what I thought he had said and he'd grade my answer as wrong, leaving me a failure at math once again.

Like two lousy ping pong players, he'd serve and I'd miss; I'd serve and he'd miss. We never seemed to get a volley going.

After a fruitless hour or so, we agreed to a time out, planning to resume the match the next afternoon. But sadly, we fared no better in that second session than the first. As his patience clearly wore thin, exasperation set in and he said:

"Earle, I don't get it. You're a smart guy. This is something that any first-year grad student in mathematics understands. Why don't you?"

"Harvey," I explained, "The average American newspaper is written for a fifth-grade reader. They're not graduate students!"

And that was the moment, I thought, the instant when the math whiz would grasp the magnitude of the void between his mind and dullards like me. That would bridge the chasm between us . . . not!

"Well what can we do to get the readership levels higher?" he asked, and my heart hit the floor.

Eventually, I was able to write the release, share it with NSF, and Harvey's award got the media coverage it deserved. But there was more writing "around" the math in that release than there was writing "about" math, and we're probably the worse for it in some way.

I've surely done more than a thousand interviews since then, probably many more, but the dialogue with Harvey always stands out as a reminder of the challenges of science communications.

There is a vast gap between the interests of scientists and those of the rest of us. And that distance grows exponentially as new discoveries are made. Our dwindling public attention span has amplified the problem, as has the deluge of messages we receive daily.

True communication between scholar and citizen is tougher now than ever before.

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But the rewards are great. Researchers should make the effort to reach down and give the rest of us a hand up, so that we can understand, if only slightly, the wonders of the world they explore.

And we, the public, need to make the effort to learn some of the stuff that, at first glance, may seem too hard.__*Earle Holland*

Tags: Researchers, Science Communication //

2 Comments »

2 Responses to "Flashbacks aren't all bad . . ."

KeHoeff // May 28, 2009 at 5:36 pm

hey this is a very interesting article!

Yudhijit Bhattacharjee // Jul 6, 2009 at 2:02 pm

Very nice!

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