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The telephone call . . .

Posted on May 1st, 2009 by earlehollland

The telephone call in the middle of the afternoon was, frankly, a bit unnerving.

It was almost like when your first-borne asks about sex. Only with the sex question, most of us who are parents know how to gauge our answer, to duck and weave and estimate the right amount of information for that given moment.

A somewhat hesitant woman's voice asked simply, "I'm interested in getting started in research — can you tell me how to begin?"

As a science writer for more than 35 years, I clearly understand research in dozens of fields, having talked to countless experts and scientists about their life's work. I can offer up a decent basic understanding of the human immune response, of tectonic drift, of quasars and quarks, and a healthy dose of anthropology. I know the scientific method and the idiosyncracies of the culture of science, and consider myself skilled in explaining research to the public.

But with that question, where does one begin? What field of research was she interested in, I asked.

"I haven't really decided on that yet," she answered.

Are you a student, I inquired hopefully? "No. I'm just interested in getting into research — how can I do that?"

I apologized to her for stammering a bit as I struggled for a starting point for the discussion. She seemed sincere, though immeasurably naïve. Her question, I explained, was sort of like asking how do you play the piano, or parachute from airplanes, or do brain surgery. Any explanation requires a common starting point and we, apparently, had none.

I explained that researchers are usually scientists or scholars who have studied, won academic degrees in specific fields, and have gone on to investigate fundamental questions that interest them. Some questions, I said, require more than a lifetime to answer — if then.

We chatted for a bit more. I suggested that, as a start, she pick a field that interested her, and a school where she could become versed in the topic. She could grow from there.



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She was appreciative, or sounded so, thanked me and hung up. And after a bit of honest consternation, I admit, I recounted it to colleagues and we all laughed. But that episode hasn't faded. It just hangs there in memory as a reminder of the void between science and the public.

Her's was an honest call and question, and it deserved a decent answer. But a valid response required a shared understanding and she simply didn't have it.

Those who do science, as well as those of us watching from the periphery, often worry about the public's inability to grasp science policy issues – stem cells, climate change, genetically modified organisms, evolution, and on and on and on. We throw up our collective hands and wail in wonder at the public's preference for the simple over the complex, the pseudo-science over real science.



Surely, the citizenry has an obligation to invest the energy to learn enough about the complexity of the world, and science in specifics, if they are to be an informed electorate.

But we are also obliged to lend a hand to those who express interest, but who are sadly uninformed. Otherwise, how can there be positive change.

I hope the caller felt that was what I did. __Earle Holland



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tc // May 3, 2009 at 9:07 pm

Was this really a tough question? My answer would have been pretty simple:

1. You have to get a B.S. relevant to the field that you're interested in doing research.
2. A M.S. or PhD would also be highly recommended follow-ups in order to continue your education/training/career development.
3. Once you're in school, doing research would be as simple as finding an opening in a lab at the university and working your ass off to show that you're capable of doing it.
4. The rest of the story is up to you.

[earleholland](#) // May 3, 2009 at 10:01 pm

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Yeah, I'd say it was a tough question if you care at all about really reaching the person asking it. Factually, your response is accurate and honest, but sometimes, people need more than just info. In this case, the questioner clearly didn't understand the nature of research and pointing that out by just passing along answers 1 thru 4 didn't seem to be actually communicating much at all. Sometimes, the best answer we can give is derived from what lies between the lines. At least that's what I've found. __EH

[Kevin](#) // May 10, 2009 at 4:31 pm

I play the piano and if someone asked me how to play the piano, I'd probably have to think for a bit. I guess you would just ask the right questions to form some sort of base and go from there. My first question would be, "why?" Once I find the motivation, it'd probably be easier to go from there.

Yudhijit Bhattacharjee // Jul 6, 2009 at 1:55 pm

Earle — You're right. It's not an easy question to answer, and providing info about the possible track the woman could take to end up in research doesn't really address what she was asking. A fundamental interpretation of her question could be — what is research? Why is it important? How can I ask interesting questions about the world, and how can I design experiments to answer them scientifically? — YB

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