

The Sweet And Bittersweet Experience Of Receiving An Honorary Degree

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As is our custom at commencement season, *The Scientist* has identified a sampling of scientists who have received honorary degrees (see story on page 1). The practice of conferring degrees honoris causa dates back more than 300 years in the United States, the first having been awarded in 1663 by the College of Rhode Island. However, not much about this tradition has been published by sociologists in recent times. A search of the *Science Citation Index* and the *Social Sciences Citation Index* from 1980 onward failed to turn up any scholarly papers on honorary degrees.

Honorary degrees, it seems, attract more attention in the popular press than in the professional literature. The mass media annually cover degrees awarded to media superstars and business luminaries (J. Barron, "For this year's graduates: pomp, circumstance and a little rock-and-roll," *New York Times*, May 29, 1995, page A8). These celebrity degrees are perceived as serving an important public relations purpose for both the awardees and the degree-granting institutions. Undoubtedly by recognizing celebrities, some universities probably also hope that a financial gift will be forthcoming from the honoree.

Of course, celebrity degrees are not the only ones that universities confer. Most honorary degrees are typically awarded to less publicly visible individuals,

including scientists. They serve a function similar to other awards in scholarship--that is, recognition of unique achievements or inventions. While the Nobel Prizes are the first such honors that come to mind, there are numerous other prestigious awards. For example, I recently attended Philadelphia's annual Franklin Institute awards convocation, which recognized, among others, Joan Ganz Cooney, who conceived the Children's Television Workshop; Nobel physicist Chen Ning Yang of the State University of New York, Stony Brook; and AT&T Bell Laboratories scientist Alfred Y. Cho.

Europe follows a different tradition in awarding honorary degrees. While honorary degrees in the U.S. are customarily conferred at commencement ceremonies for students, in Europe they may be bestowed at any time during the academic year. I say this from personal experience, having received honorary degrees in various seasons from the Free University of Brussels, the University of Rome, and Charles University in Prague. Being honored by Charles University last month was both a sweet and bittersweet experience. Sweet, because of the warm and gracious welcome by my hosts. Bittersweet, because I recalled the former plight of many Eastern European scientists with whom I have had special relationships going back to

the pre-perestroika era of oppression and censorship.

These relationships developed as a result of my series of essays in *Current Contents*, which many readers of *The Scientist* may recall. Even the most oppressive political regimes in the East recognized the value of scientific information dissemination. But only up to a point, as many primary research journals, such as *Science* and *Nature*, were routinely censored. *Current Contents* was not considered a scientific journal per se, so it was accessible to most researchers in Eastern Europe. Many have said that my essays were about the only uncensored material they could read on a regular basis. In effect, *Current Contents* was a unique link between Eastern European scientists and international scholarship.

It was a pleasure to finally be able to meet personally with many of the Czech scientists I had previously known only through correspondence. Space does not permit me to describe the elegant pomp and circumstance of the ceremony, which took place in one of the world's oldest university buildings, the 14th-century Carolinum. In fact, Charles University was the first in central

Europe, founded in 1348 by Emperor Charles IV.

The ceremony was made all the more meaningful by the presence of my son Joshua, as well as Jan Vlachy, the Czech physicist who helped pioneer the development of scientometrics both regionally and internationally. And for their generous hospitality, I am indebted to my hosts, Frantisek Choc and Milan R. Spala of the Institute of Scientific Information, First Medical School at Charles University.

When I left the Czech Republic, it was particularly gratifying to know that mirror sites of the Internet edition of *The Scientist* are being established in Prague, which will make this newspaper accessible via the World Wide Web on the same day it is posted in the U.S. From *Current Contents* to *The Scientist*, we have indeed come full circle: A nation that was a cradle of intellectual inquiry, but for much of this century denied its researchers open access to the literature, now hosts an information source that is freely available to the world scientific community.
