

President's Message



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Dear Colleagues and Fellow Planetarians

Well everyone, the time is nigh: the IPS 2010 conference at Alexandria, Egypt is good to go. I do hope that all of you who can will try to get there as this is a landmark event for the IPS.

It is the first conference that we will have held on the African continent, and it will be the first in the Arabic-speaking world. I think that both these elements are very important, as one of our prime functions is the promotion of our profession worldwide so that children all over the planet can learn about the mysteries of the cosmos in their local planetariums. We hope that this conference may help lead to the formation of an Arabic-speaking affiliate group eligible to join the IPS Council.

During the meeting in Alexandria, we are looking forward to the change in perspective and of pace, as the Egyptian people are immensely proud of their long history. We also anticipate learning more and experiencing firsthand the impressive artifacts of civilization in the Nile Valley, and the undoubted importance of astronomical observations to this earliest of human societies.

When I first put my vision for the future to IPS members in Melbourne to persuade you to vote for me, I did so on a platform of further internationalizing our society. In seeking support for this aim, I believe that I was following in the footsteps of previous IPS presidents who had also striven to achieve this target.

One result of this effort has been the recent admission of the Brazilian planetariums as affiliate members of the IPS Council. I look forward to this addition to the IPS family becoming an exemplar for other planetarium groupings and associations around the world to join IPS.

Lessons from Labour

As I write this article, the UK is in the middle of a general election campaign for a new national government. The incumbent party is called the Labour Party, as it grew from the organized labour movement, and is still sup-

ported and funded by the trade unions. Their slogan in the past was "Unity is Strength" and this has relevance to the IPS.

While appreciating that unity of effort and purpose is a strong foundation, especially when presenting a case for the retention of an astronomy planetarium programme to less-than-supportive accountants and budget people, I also strongly believe in the value of diversity.

I think that the IPS is strengthened by the diversity of our membership. I have written before about the diverse viewpoints of our members; for example, the passionately-held views that fuel endless discussions on the relative merits of different projection systems. The IPS includes a large number of members who are individuals working alone with their portable planetariums as well as huge state-of-the-art facilities like the ultra modern Beijing Planetarium with multiple theatre spaces and huge numbers of visitors.

Our Worldview is Important

It is our ability in IPS to collect such a diversity of opinion under one all-encompassing umbrella and worldview that is hugely beneficial. It also provides us with a great platform and wealth of experience that can be used to advise our funders and administrators. As I write this, I am mindful of the current turmoil in the USA over continuing budget support for small school-based planetariums.

Our diversity also shows that the IPS is a microcosm of the real world, and that we already serve a huge section of the human community. The little boys and girls in Cape Town, South Africa and Niteroi, Brazil who dream of becoming scientists are inspired by their planetarium presenters in the same way as those who are fortunate enough to live in the countries of the European Union and the USA.

I believe that it is the job of the IPS President and the IPS Council to expand our reach and to encourage groups to form an alliance of common interest ("unity") so that they may be eligible to join and benefit from the diversity of our collective experience.

Lessons Remembered

I have been following a very informative and visually stimulating new TV series on the *Wonders of the Solar System*, which has just been broadcast by BBC2 in the UK. It is presented by physicist Professor Brian Cox of the University of Manchester and is well worth a look. I guess that it may make the public broadcasting channels in North America, and

it will surely appear as a DVD set.

The program has prompted me to think more about teaching astronomy. I firmly believe that good teachers are born, not made. I assume that many of you may have had the mind-expanding experience of working under the direction of a good teacher or of a gifted mentor who really inspired you to do well.

My most memorable teachers taught physics and chemistry at the school I attended in Belfast in the 1960s. Brian Anderson was the chemistry teacher with a passionate, vulpine personality. He took no prisoners; his mantra was that you had to know your stuff. It was your job to learn it and then to use it. He explained to us the fabulous precision of the periodic table and what you could learn and infer from it.

The physics teacher was Billy Brown, a softly-spoken avuncular Scot, who skillfully wove together the disparate parts of the jigsaw that was modern physics. His gift was that we should never take anything for granted and that we must do the experiments for ourselves: do the work, make the observations and apply the maths. We were given the tools and told to form the hypotheses and theories for ourselves; we were not to be concerned about failures. Mistakes are the pathway to experience and a better theory.

I do fear that the modern UK educational system is more about ideology and ticking boxes rather than the great educational experience which can be achieved by carefully targeted digressions.

Lessons from the Best Teachers

The best teachers can conjure magic from thin air, exploiting our human susceptibility for good stories and our vivid imaginations. In my previous experience as a geology professor, I used to ask my students to close their eyes to visualize what an ancient undersea environment may have looked like. This blocks out visual distractions, thus preventing the hard-wired ability to detect small movements and changes in our visual field which might have kept us safe from predators when we lived on the savannas of Africa.

This visualization technique is also used by sports coaches asking that their aspirant winners see themselves coming first and standing in the podium to get the gold. We do it, too, every day in the planetarium dome. It's all in the mind.

So too, we can ask our small visitors to see themselves, clad in a space suit, scaling Olympus Mons on Mars. I am always impressed by the unfettered power of a primary school child's imagination, and their ability to see themselves as space explorers. Try it out. You will be pleasantly surprised.

I wish you all dark and clear skies, wherever you are. ☆