

## A Day at the Lecture Hall Circus

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The ever-growing annual schedule of professional meetings is past midyear. Many of these offerings have provided excellent educational experiences, reports of current research, and welcomed opportunities to renew old acquaintances and meet new friends. While most attendees have been exposed to good science and much show-and-tell skill, there are also characteristics of typical lecture hall personalities and happenings that seem noteworthy because of their lighter side.

At a gathering of about 200 to 500 participants, the typical first-day scientific program may have trouble getting launched because of late-arriving dignitaries, audiovisual paraphernalia and personnel, or the folks who occupy the seats. If the welcoming reception the night before ran a little late with liberal libations, entry into the lecture hall will likely be a bit delayed by the continuation of the past evening's conversations and the hugs and kisses of old homeweek reunion greetings. As the introductions and welcoming remarks at the podium finally get underway, possibly the front five rows have been attentive and heard what was said; the rest of the room is filled with meandering chatterers still searching for places to perch.

The first speaker has been identified and begins with thanks all around; then after the first four slides, he finds that the changer mechanism is malfunctioning. All the audience has seen thus far are the colorful title slides advertising the meeting, presenter, and affiliations. At this juncture, the late arrivals, still groping around in the dark trying to find nonexistent aisle seats (all the while parading in front of the projector beams), have not missed much. The moderator rushes to the platform only to discover that simply the wrong button had been pushed. The house lights, which earlier defied adjustment, are again dimmed, and the presentation resumes. The first speaker only runs 10 minutes late and, without further complication, finishes to the assembled applause and relief of the program chair.

The second speaker is a well-dressed and coiffured woman. As she reaches the podium and the moderator greets her with the lavalier mike in hand, there is a bit of audience titillation as he searches for a place to clamp the thing. The two parties maneuver, and, after finally reaching agreement on an appropriate location, the speaker's blush subsides, and she embarks on her oration. All goes well until the data slides appear and the first two on the dual projectors are covered with numbers too tiny for first-row occupants to see. Prefacing these illustrations with, "I know you can't read these, but what they say is, . . ." the speaker assumes the listeners cannot add the columns to confirm their accuracy. The next slides are well done, but when the clinical pictures resume, the dark/light contrast of the pairs shown is such that one could question whether they came from the same mouth or species. The most

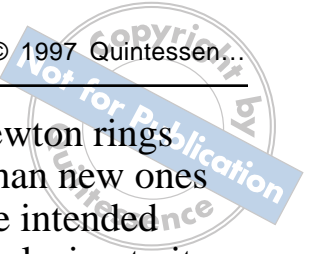
critical view was partially obliterated by large plastic retractors, so the spoken word was accepted as fact. As the aroma of coffee wafted into the hall, feet began shuffling, and before pertinent concluding remarks could be offered, some of the audience had begun to crawl over their neighbors as migration to the refreshments began.

By now the program was 25 minutes behind, and the room had hardly emptied when the lights began to blink, indicating the program was ready to resume. The speaker who follows any coffee break can count on disruption for the first half of his or her presentation; so to entice the participants to return promptly, the program chair had scheduled a three-projector presentation by a well-known and skilled clinician. However, now with coffee overload, the noisy stragglers continued to drift in 15 minutes after the speaker had started. Obviously irritated, the speaker paused and commented on the inconsiderate behavior before continuing.

The show was entertaining, but as it progressed, a couple of flashbulbs popped, and a camcorder whirred, much to the chagrin of the moderator and engrossed listeners. Not all of the three screens were filled with scientific material; interspersed were views of snow-capped mountains, flower-decorated meadows, and boat-filled harbors framed in brilliant blue skies and water. The presentation droned on much too long, and the psychedelic atmosphere created by the constant wanderings of the laser pointer around the screens, walls, and ceiling distracted some. Bored by it all, some in the audience sought refuge in their crackling plastic shopping bags, now filled with goodies from the exhibit booths. Others could not retain the coffee any longer and made their way to the restrooms. As they left the room, the doors clanked shut to block out the intermittent light from the foyer. This confusion aroused several of the last-row crowd who had sprawled out for a morning nap.

As the extravaganza finally came to the summary, groups left to save seats at the luncheon tables. The concluding remarks were drowned out by aisle conversations as the audience exodus continued. Postsession assessments were mixed; some were genuinely impressed, while others chided all the logos, icons, and monograms appearing in the lower corners of some slides.

Having the first speaker slot after lunch is the kiss of death. This day was no exception. Now running even later, the moderator dutifully pleaded for a return to seats. Finally, at 1:50 PM, the first afternoon presenter took over. After the audience had settled down some 15 minutes into the lecture, the speaker's attention was drawn to a casual stroller making his way up the center aisle, craving attention. Shortly after finding a seat in the second row, Dr Casual remembered that he had not called the office, climbed over several people to get to the aisle, and marched out. No sooner had the back of the head left the room than the face reappeared, slowly coming back up the center aisle to assure all a view of his presence. The lecturer paused and shook his head in utter disbelief!



Meanwhile, the slides on the screen were trying to dry out as the Newton rings danced around in Rorschach patterns. No sooner would some clear up than new ones would resume the rainbow patterns, making it hard to concentrate on the intended message. The tension was relieved as a smuggled recorder beeped a conclusion to its tape. This was humorously encored by a beeping wristwatch, obviously rescuing its owner from a postmeal nap.

One more speaker presented, then during the afternoon break, the scheduled concluding speaker made his way into the lecture hall only to find that the projectionist had just overturned one of his uncovered slide trays and was scrambling to retrieve the contents. Finally gathering all of the disarrayed slides, the speaker dashed to the speaker ready room to get things in order. As the attendees found their way back from the coke break, the shaken essayist strode to the platform after reassembling his audiovisual brains and plunged into his important dissertation. Making a marvelous recovery, he presented flawlessly, marred only by the failure of the laser pointer, which had been overworked during the morning session, and only one upside-down slide. Halfway back in the dark room, a snoring duo was working off the effects of a long day and the late night before. However, those occupying surrounding seats had long since left the sleeping beauties to their dreams on an island to themselves.

After the final presentation, the day's speakers gathered on the platform for a panel discussion. Those in the audience with earth-shattering questions queued up at the aisle mikes. The *first in line* gave his own long-winded diatribe, then asked a feeble question, the answer to which was obvious to all in the room. Following several more queries, the last of which had been beaten to death, the *first in line* was back again for another lecture; he then proceeded to forget what he had come to ask! Later, a stimulating point was raised that prompted a good group discussion among the speakers, and then the panel ended.

Among the passing comments heard on the way out was one by an attendee who had been arriving late all day long. "I can't understand why these things can't operate on time!" With that pronouncement and some tongue in cheek, one could most assuredly conclude that not all of the animals and clowns had been left under the Big Top; some were at the traveling lecture hall circus!!