After-dinner speech at the banquet of the annual Finnish Physical Society meeting

My name is Kari Enqvist, and I am a professor of cosmology at the University of Helsinki.

I have been coming to the meetings of the Finnish Physical Society ever since I was a student. I remember the after-dinner speeches well: they were given by older gentlemen, who seemed to enjoy what they were doing. Sometimes they were the only ones.

They were never introduced so that as a young student, I never knew who they were. I assumed that they were so distinguished that they needed no introduction, and I was too ashamed to ask who they were. That's why I introduced myself just now.

Later, I found out that the after-dinner speakers are chosen more on the basis of their capability to make fools of themselves. I know this because many years ago, I have once already been the speaker. At that time I felt that what I said did not go down so well, considering that afterwards nobody spoke to me for two weeks.

This is why I made a study of what is the proper way to give the after-dinner speech. And I discovered the following:

First, there should be an introductory part with many jokes. This is then followed by the main part, which often consists of critical comments on Universities, funding issues or academic life in Finland. Finally, after grim predictions and various complaints one should nevertheless end with a positive, self-congratulatory note.

Being brief is also a virtue. Therefore I will skip the jokes and go directly to the serious business. This is a challenge to me since my research focuses on what happened in the universe before the first second. Whatever happens after that tends only to get me confused.

Nevertheless, I want to discuss Working time allocation. For those lucky few, who do not know what this means let me tell you: it does not mean anything good.

Our annual working time is set at 1600 hours, which we are then supposed to break down to various activities like teaching, research and so on; if we get external funding, we should declare how many hours we spend doing things related to that particular funding source.

Many of us at the universities complain a lot about the working time allocation. But I think one should try to be positive. The whole issue actually brings to my mind the time when, as a student, I worked one summer as a postman.

Now, this is a true story. I delivered mail to one of the postal districts in central Helsinki. You had to wake up very early, but if you were very effective, you could be back home by noon.

We all had our own desks, and there were pigeon hole-like shelves, into which we first sorted out the mail. Each hole corresponded to one single address. Everything was done manually; those were the good old days. The sorting-out was really the most time-consuming part of the whole delivery process.

Then, one morning there was a note on my desk saying that for one week, I should count and make a note how many letters, journals, newspapers, postcards, and so on, passed through my hands. This all sounded very annoying and very much like working time allocation. So I went to the foreman and asked: “Am I really supposed to do this?”

And he instructed me to open a drawer in my desk and take out a piece of paper. It was an old piece of paper, very worn-out. On it were numbers: the weekly amounts of letters, journals, and so on, counted by some past diligent soul, bless him. They were not written with ink and quill pen, but almost. You could see the paper was old.

And the foreman said to me: “Why don’t you just copy these.” And I did exactly that, with small variations. After all, I was a budding physicist and we do

understand systematic errors. For instance, I figured that the number of postcards should be on the increase, with people travelling more and all that. So I reported the number of postcards a little higher than what the paper said.

And then I started thinking: this is now happening in hundreds of postal offices all over Finland. There are people copying old numbers everywhere. All these reports, all these numbers will then be collected somewhere. There will be secretaries making copies and tables.

There will be meetings and discussions where coffee and Danish pastries will be consumed in great quantities. There will be memoranda and reports, and by some sort of an administrative osmosis, information will climb step by step to higher and higher levels until finally it lands on the desk of the postmaster general of Finland.

Who, as a side remark, at that time was a former theoretical physicist.

And I imagined that the postmaster general meets the prime minister – and this could happen during the Independence Day celebration at the presidential palace. All those medals are clinking and twinkling, and the prime minister asks, like, how's the old post office?

And the postmaster general reports: "Great. The quantity of mail has been steady for many years. Surprisingly steady. However, there seems now to be an increase in postcards."

And prime minister replies in a delighted manner: "Yes, I've always urged people to travel more. Nice to see my policies vindicated."

So we should think of how much joy Working time allocation brings to many people. There are people in charge of excel-tables and pie-charts and all those things that modern-day computers can generate. People who copy and paste results and reports. Not forgetting meetings and Danish pastries.

However, there is a serious deficiency in Working time allocation. It presumes that we all are doing something at all times. The truth is, often we do nothing. And this

is very important work, because by doing nothing, you sometimes can accomplish very much. Indeed, often by doing something at all times you find that in the end you have not accomplished anything worthwhile.

Think if Einstein were living in these times. I am sure he would dutifully allocate his working time.

9-11 Did some thinking.

11-12 Wrote down energy = ?

12-13 Had some lunch.

1-2 Erased the question mark, wrote instead: mass times c squared.

2-5 Did nothing.

Then an administrator would call him saying: “Mr Einstein, I see that from 2 to 5 you have done nothing. I am afraid we will have to deduct those hours from your salary.”

“Ach, nein!”

“Moreover”, the administrator would go on, “I can’t help noticing that your equation is very short. It is, if I may say so, a very brief excuse of an equation. You don’t seem to be very productive, Mr Einstein. Can’t you come up with longer equations? Produce more! Long equations, Mr Einstein, that’s the ticket.”

“Ja ja, I vill try.”

Now you know the true motivation behind General Theory of Relativity.

There are times when a computer does not do anything. You try to click the mouse but nothing happens. Perhaps you get the message: “system is not responding”.

That happens to people, too. We just stare ahead and nothing happens. For some, this could go on for days. The system is not responding.

This is an item we need to have in the Working time allocation. “System not responding”, 100 hours. “Limited or no connection”, 80 hours. “Rebooting the brain”, 40 hours.

The key question is of course: how could we get more money for physics. Let me give some advice to all the heads of the departments and deans and such people. The next time you negotiate with the administration and they ask: “What is it that you actually do?” be bold and say: “Well, often we do nothing. “

Say that this is something that we really want to focus on, but in order to do more nothing, we need more money.

With this no doubt highly helpful suggestion, let me return to the very early universe and thank you for your attention.

Kari Enqvist
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