

Blue Book Note 2010, A Space Oddity

There is a book by Isaac Asimov, or is it Kurt Vonnegut, which describes a race of alien beings whose reproduction requires three parents. In academia, your supervisors are your parents, and over the years I have had three: Alan Bundy, Geraint Wiggins, and Alan Smaill. All three are exceptional academics, and great people. In this note, I will write a few words about Alan, partly to point out something which I think is very important which I think Alan has exemplified very well - the people side of science - and partly as a way of saying thankyou.

A few years ago, when I was near the end of my PhD - supervised by Alan and Geraint - I was giving a Dream talk. Thinking about it now, I realise how much I miss Dream talks, and how important they were, but back then, so long ago that I hadn't even thrown away my "The Cure" CDs yet, I was preoccupied with being nervous. Maybe it was a difficult proof? maybe I was having a bad day? somehow the talk wasn't taking the right shape. My fellow Dreamers coughed, looked at their shoes, or hummed subsonically, but I struggled on, and as the talk started to come together my confidence grew, and pretty soon my wave fronts were lapping contentedly around the edges of the whiteboard. Far off on the horizon a fisherman succeeded in pulling in his line after a long struggle, only to discover he had caught a sink. I surveyed the audience after a particularly spectacular display of coloured wave fronts and discovered that Alan was asleep. My point is that Alan was relaxed. I don't remember Alan ever shouting at anybody. I don't remember him breathing down my neck asking where was X, Y or Z. These things are important: the way scientists interact affects profoundly how pleasurable it is to do science, and it affects how well they can do science, because science has a social aspect. It goes the other way too, though: people have a scientific aspect. Something Alan has rightly pushed for a long time is the need to do experimental evaluations, even when the subject matter seems a bit fluffy and ill-formed¹.

Recently NASA gave me the task of managing a large distributed research project, with lots of academic partners. I imagine a herd of cats, with me

¹They evaluate medicines experimentally. Case closed.

standing in the middle frantically pointing this way and that in my attempt to direct the work. Now I appreciate how well Alan shepherded his research program. One of reasons he has been so effective is that he recognised the importance of communication: to some extent, the herd of cats must manage itself and transcend its herdiness; it must become a flock of cats. Dreamers benefited greatly from two communication tools: blue notes, and dream talks. They were great. I miss them. I'm going to copy them, and I won't be the first to do that.

Julian Richardson