

HOMEWORK SET 00: PERSONAL INTRODUCTION

Due Friday, January 26, 2024

My home town is Aurora, Colorado, a suburb just east of Denver. I was born in Denver, but never lived in the city. As a kid, I was very interested in nature ... the trees, the sky, the animals and the mountains. From my parents' living room, I could see the Front Range of the Rockies and loved the view and the mountains.

I didn't much care for school, though. I did OK, but mostly found it quite dull. And science in school was the worst. For all my interest in nature, school science was never interesting. They never taught me anything I wanted to know. They put us in the lab ... an alienating place with its high, black tables and scary-looking equipment ... and had us do tasks that seemed contrived to me. And it all seemed very far from the nature I wanted to learn about.

Graduating from high school as soon as I could with the minimum (not college prep) credits. I figured I'd get a job and get my own apartment with a friend. Yeah. Not as a girl barely out of high school in 1976, I wouldn't! There were few, if any, jobs that I could get as a female that paid anywhere near what it took to obtain and maintain a car and an apartment. But I couldn't stand staying in my parents' house!

My father had always said he'd pay for college (as much as he could) if we got into college. So I applied to an open-admissions community college, Colorado Mountain College, and got in. Since I was the youngest kid, Dad could pay the entire bill ... probably less than \$800/quarter. My life was changed dramatically in my first quarter as I took Earth Science and ... Lo, and Behold! ... science was about nature! I decided to become a geologist and was told to take calculus and physics to pursue that. I struggled through college algebra but then loved trigonometry and calculus. Yeah, math was cool!

Physics, on the other hand, drove me nuts. When the professor lectured and did examples, it all looked so elegant. But when I tried to solve the problems, they seemed impossible! Then the professor would do them and they made perfect sense! That really teed me off.

Meanwhile I took astronomy and read Carl Sagan's *The Cosmic Connection* and my mind was snared by the cosmos. So I decided to pursue a Ph.D. in astrophysics. Eleven years of struggle later, I was granted a Ph.D. in physics with a dissertation in astrophysics.

What a surprising and unexpected place for a kid who didn't like school or science to end up!!

My motivation through all those difficult years of undergraduate and graduate work in physics was that I wanted to do for others what that Earth Science professor had done for me ... throw open the curtains on the physical universe! So as I was finishing my Ph.D. I applied for professor jobs in liberal arts colleges. I ended up at St. Lawrence ... a fling, I thought, at a snobby, private liberal arts college that I couldn't have gotten into and my father would not have paid for. I figured I'd spend five years here then move back to my native west.

Another surprise ... I stayed because the physics department is a terrific group of people, the school affords me very good opportunities and freedoms, I like the students, and I love the rural life in NoCoNY.

So here I am. Still surprised.

To you, my student, I'm sure much of your life will surprise you and I hope you can savor the adventure! Go for it, kid!