



Something to Say

Physicist Stephen Quake has learned the power of the pen. But not from his 99 scientific papers describing his research in biophysics, microfluidics, and genomics. None of those writings stirred the kind of impassioned feedback he got as a guest blogger for *The New York Times*.

Online reviews of his accounts of life in the ivory tower ranged from enthusiastic (“Bravo!” and “marvelously insightful”) to cranky (“lopsided and unfair”).

Quake wrote four weekly guest columns for *The Wild Side*, a science blog on the *Times* website. Starting on February 10, he gave a taste of the daily realities of being a scientist at a modern research university—warts and all.

For instance, he described the brutal pressure to win enough research funding, especially for creative, high-risk projects. And he shot down “the snobbish idea” that “pure” basic science research is separate from and superior to applied research. “I had a lot to get off my chest,” says Quake, an HHMI investigator at Stanford University. “And it was fun to do a little venting in a public forum.”

The writing stint came about when *The Wild Side’s* longtime blogger, Olivia Judson, an evolutionary biologist at Imperial College London, took a six-month sabbatical. The *Times* wanted several guest columnists to fill in. Judson thought of Quake, who she met in 1987 when they both attended Stanford. “He was good at physics and I wasn’t,” says Judson, laughing. “Insofar as I made any progress in physics, it was because Steve talked me through it.” The two lost touch over the years, but Judson would occasionally happen upon one of his research papers. “I saw he was doing exciting and important work.”

When Judson e-mailed in November to ask if he’d be willing to dive into the blogosphere, Quake says he was “a little bit daunted” but open to the challenge. So Judson passed his name and a few others to her editors, who were considering a number of candidates. He was one of seven who made the cut.

Quake shoehorned time for writing into the crevices of an already crammed schedule. “I did it everywhere—at home, in the office, on the airplane, in a taxi, in

hotel rooms,” he says. To his surprise, he found himself focusing mostly on policy and social issues.

In his hardest-hitting post, “The Crumbling Ivory Tower,” Quake argued that when academic researchers have a financial stake in commercializing their basic lab discoveries, peer review can protect against potential biases in results. Instead, he wrote, university bureaucracies try to manage conflicts of interest “often by meddling into faculty research in ways that create more heat than light.” He also criticized university licensing offices for impeding technology transfer.

That essay elicited some of the most heated reader responses. Although he wasn’t expected to answer comments, sometimes, Quake says with a laugh, “I had to hold myself back.”

He admits to catching the blogging bug. With those four essays under his belt, Quake is keeping a list of future topics. —Ingfei Chen

FOR MORE INFORMATION: To read Quake’s blogs, go to: judson.blogs.nytimes.com/author/Stephen-Quake.
