

THE DIRECTOR'S CORNER

MEA CULPA. WE A CULPA?¹

I meant no harm, I promise.

In the last issue of *Radiations*, I wanted to refer to the author of our cover story a second time; I reflexively chose to use "Ms. Tannenwald," feeling rather virtuous that I didn't blurt out "Miss" or "Mrs."

What does it say about me that I didn't stop when selecting an appropriate title to consider that she is an associate professor of International Relations at Brown University, a fact that was highlighted in a colorful purple box in that very issue. What does it mean that "Dr. Tannenwald" would have no doubt been my reflexive choice if she was an older, male physics professor?²

Perhaps I meant no harm, but was there harm done? Were some readers of my introductory comments led to continue making the same mistake themselves without stopping for introspection, receiving implicit validation by seeing this kind of oversight in print? Undoubtedly. Were some readers subconsciously moved to question the author's credibility and authority? Probably. Were yet other readers led to conclude that I was intentionally trying to signal a lower level of respect, and thus, I soured their impression of the honor society or of physics as a discipline? Perhaps. Was Dr. Tannenwald herself led to wonder if the slight was a sign of dis-

respect, leading to weaker interactions in the future? Possibly.³

So, I take this space and time to apologize for the blunder, and to mention it explicitly in print, so that we all become more aware of how easy it is to err in this way, and with the hopes that future mishaps will be avoided. Please forgive me.

In a peripherally related bit of news I would like to report that the governing SPS Council has approved the theme for this academic year: Future Faces of Physics. As part of the theme the SPS Council envisions a year of dialogue on diversity in physics with the intent of increasing the visibility and focus on this issue for the physics community. This action is driven in part by a recent report from the National Academies of Science stressing the need for professional scientific societies to take a leading role in addressing issues of diversity (see NAS publication, 'Beyond Bias and Barriers'). Included among the goals of this SPS initiative are:

1) to provide a forum for students and physics community leaders to discuss and act on a wide variety of student diversity

(continued on page 11)

[1] With apologies to Latin instructors everywhere.

[2] Perhaps it's a bit narcissistic, but in trying to understand how and why I did this, I decided to re-visit my past writings for *Radiations* to search for similar circumstances. In the 13 issues that have been published since I took the reigns at Sigma Pi Sigma, I have referred to dozens of scientists and writers, usually by their last names for the better known, or their full names, otherwise. In four cases, I used a title, always when I referred to the person a second time in the space of a single article, as follows:

◆ Physicist Millie Dresselhaus is later referred to as Professor Dresselhaus in the Spring 2003 issue;

◆ Physicist John Rigden is later referred to as Professor Rigden in the Spring 2003 issue;

◆ Erasto Mpemba is later referred to as Mr. Mpemba in the Fall 2006 issue; and

◆ Nina Tannenwald is later referred to as Ms. Tannenwald in the Spring 2007 issue.

While it is risky to try to draw conclusions from such a small data set, one might be tempted to conclude that while my biases may be gender based, but they may also be based in age, race, discipline, or something else. I don't actually know whether the physicist Erasto Mpemba, who is only a few years older than me, has a doctoral degree, so his case is excep-

tional for several reasons...so, while I still don't know why I picked the titles I did, I do know that I ought to be paying more attention to which titles I pick.

[3] Incidentally, I was led gently to discover the error of my ways by others, not by Dr. Tannenwald herself. She was very gracious in accepting my apology, saying:

We all make these mistakes! Even my female undergrads at Brown (who consider themselves a sophisticated lot) are not immune. I've gotten emails from female students opening "Dear Nina." At the end of my response to them I include a postscript, "By the way, do you call your male professors by their first names?" Usually they don't, and they're mortified to realize what they've done.

While I personally appreciate your making the correction where you can, the most important reason to do so is obviously the example it sets for your physics students readers—both female and male. As they say in the education world, this small lapse—and it's really very small, though symbolically important—can be turned advantageously into a "teaching opportunity."

I hope that this column can help teach this lesson by addressing the issue head on...



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THE DIRECTOR'S CORNER

(continued from page 3)

issues such as making physics more welcoming to all, hindering the effects of bias, financial aid issues, child care/family leave issues, non-traditional physics career trajectories, the importance of competent, diverse mentoring;

2) to provide participants (both actual and virtual) with authoritative documentation of the current climate for under-represented groups in physics;

3) to facilitate inter-organizational cooperation in addressing diversity issues in physics; and

4) to produce a statement in support of diversity in physics for adoption by SPS, preferably brief and potent.

Typically, over a dozen SPS zone meetings are held throughout the year, and part of the plan is to provide extra support for meeting organizers to hold a diversity workshop/ quiz show as part of the meeting. These regional meetings, some of which are traditionally held jointly with sectional meetings of AAPT and APS, will lead up to the Sigma Pi Sigma Quadrennial Congress to be held on November 7-8, 2008, at FermiLab, IL, where a culminating diversity event will be held.

Join us in celebrating diversity in the Future Faces of Physics at a zone meeting near you!

