

Discounted Tickets for Science Education

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“OK. Enough. I get it. You need the money. Here, take it; but please, please don’t bother me for another year. All right?” Finally surrendering to my endless bragging, my parents handed me the money. And I was happy and grateful, but also tired. Tired of all the efforts that went into persuading them.

Back then, in my high school years, there was this show that was coming to our smallish town. It was one of those shows that everybody was endlessly talking about. “Read a lot about it; we have to go,” said one of my friends. Yes, the show was all over the newspapers. “The tickets are incredibly expensive,” said yet another. And yes, the tickets were expensive. There was absolutely no way for me to afford a ticket with my own budget.

I wanted to see the show, so I had to ask my family for help. Sure, I was not a straight-A student, but never did I get myself into trouble at school. As a high-school student with lots of homeworks to do every single day, I never had a chance to make any money, but I was frugal and saving up as much as I could. Apparently, what I could manage to save up wasn’t enough. Approached with the right attitude, however I thought my parents would be willing to support me. So I asked them for the money and they said no. I asked them again and the answer was still the same; but I kept asking. Every day, I worked on what I would be saying to them the next day, carefully picking each word to better explain myself. And just when I was about to give up, they agreed to help me with the ticket.

On the day of the show, I found myself in the middle of a well-dressed crowd that acted with manners, a crowd that I was pretty unfamiliar with. My astonishment, however, was interrupted by staff: ‘Sir! Sir? Can I please see your ticket? Hmmm. Straight ahead to the stairs and all the way up.’ So I followed his instructions and found my seat to only realize that not only

my view was obstructed but also I was far, far away from the stage.

The show was beautiful, though – as I told my family when I got back home. Sure, I wasn't able to see the faces of those famous artists, but I did enjoy their dance figures and pick a few words here and there, just enough to understand the gist of it.

The next day, my parents handed me the newspaper with our town's famous critic's picture on the front page. Apparently, he was also at the show and enjoyed every bit of it from his seat at the front. "Their incredibly detailed costumes," he wrote, "were complemented with their timely gestures." And in his column were there many other details that I didn't even come close to realize during the show. Reading that well-written critique, I felt as if I went to see a rip-off of the show the other day.

In my dreams, I often see myself at the show sitting right next to this acknowledged critic. I dream myself watching the show nervously, because I have to write a critique of the show after I get home. "Will I be able to describe every detail?". Will try. "What if I don't like the show?" Maybe I won't. "Will it even get published?" Perhaps. And I wake up.

The high school years are now way back in time, of course. I am now a graduate student working towards my Ph.D. degree. My biggest concern today may not be whether I make it to a show, but it is those experiments that I have to complete in a timely manner. Maybe I don't have to ask my parents for ticket money, but I have to ask my advisor for money to order new reagents. As a trainee, I may not have to worry about where I sit at a theater, but I worry whether I will find a reasonable post-doctoral position. I might not have to tell my parents about the shows, but I need to tell my committee about my research every year. Maybe I don't envy that critic any more, but I envy those well-funded laboratories and their papers.

No doubt that we live in extremely competitive times. The competition in landing jobs, getting grants and publishing is worrisome for all of us, including young scientists like me. Exploring new ideas and making our own scientific decisions are now almost impossible and is being considered risky for our career. The pressure of getting interesting results and getting them published in high-impact journals is hindering creative thinking and hurting the way we educate new scientists. We are not doing science for the sake of science, but doing it for the sake of a good track record.

Scientific training doesn't and shouldn't have to be this way. Some of the established scientists are, of course, aware of this situation and working their ways top-down to change things. But it is not enough. We also need to work

our way bottom-up. To do this, we need to better prepare young scientists.

We can, for example, start establishing small funds to be granted to the students. With this money, young scientists can do their preliminary experiments and explore, on their own, whether that idea is worthy of pursuing. We can allow them to decide on how the money will be spent and help them act independently. We can encourage them to publish their positive and negative results. We can let them team up with other fellows and spend their money collaboratively. That is, we can let them gain experience in things they will get to do in the near future.

Or let me put it this way: It is time we reserve front seats for kids to their favorite shows and allow them critique at an earlier age to help them become better critics.