

## Personal Reactions

On Fri, 22 Jan 1999, David Bradley, Science Writer

<http://www.camsoft.com/elemental/>

wrote:

-- I wondered whether you would like to take part in an electronic interview for my column on ChemWeb. The questions are below and you can check out previous reactions from scientists from post-docs to Professors at

<http://www.ChemWeb.com/alchem/home.html>  
under 'Getting Personal'?

To which I responded:

Brief Biography:

DOB, 1938; BS, Cal Tech, '60; Ph.D. Berkeley, '64; Makerere Univ. College, Uganda, 64-66; Carlton College 66-67; Bucknell Univ. 67- present.

Name: John Neale Cooper

Title: Professor

Job title: Prof. of Chemistry

Institute/Company: Bucknell University

Birthplace: San Antonio, Texas, USA

Major life events: Born, Schooling, Married, 1st child, Divorced, Re-married, 2nd Child.

How would you describe yourself: Writer masquerading as a chemist.

Awards this year: Nil

Current research interests: Kinetics and mechanisms of reactions of coordinated ligands.

- What is your web address?

<http://www.departments.bucknell.edu/chemistry/cooper1.html>

- How did you get your current job?

Applied for it, interviewed, was hired.

- What do you think clinched the deal?

Having what they thought they wanted.

- What do you enjoy about your work?

Teaching and research.

- What aspects (other than getting rid of paperwork!) would you change?  
Better students, those more interested in learning rather than just earning paper credentials.
  
- What do you hate about your industry/field?  
Ignorant administrators who think they know better than the soldiers in the trenches what it takes to survive and make progress in the battle against superstition, ignorance and getting-by.
  
- What was your first experiment as a (a) child (b) scientist?
  - a. teasing red ants in the garden .. got stung!
  - b. to try to make a series of substituted compounds to try to determine the nature of a transition state.
  
- Did it work?  
Nope!
  
- With what results?  
The syntheses didn't work.
  
- What did that teach you?  
The best laid plans of mice and men .. Not all good ideas are feasible .. one has to select from among those you have, those that have a prayer of actually paying out. Of course the others are often the most fun and occasionally provide the most interesting results.
  
- What was your chemistry teacher at school like?  
Wild and crazy, literally. He was killed by a bolt of lightning in the fall of that year while climbing a windmill in a thunderstorm. I've written a snapshot story of him.
  
- How did that inspire you?  
Wild and crazy is sometimes much more interesting than slow and steady.
  
- What would the teenage you think of the present-day you?  
Interesting, but a little slow; definitely different from the rest of the crowd.
  
- What is your greatest strength?  
Honesty, intellectual integrity, alternative perspectives.
  
- Weakness?  
Talk/write too much.
  
- How do you overcome this?  
I don't care to. Weaknesses are like seasoning to the character; they add spice.
  
- What advice would you give a younger chemist?  
Stay flexible, push the envelope, keep alive by consciously thinking of things: what works, why, what would happen if .. then try it.
  
- What areas would you like advice yourself?

What to do when the jig is up, pedagogically.

- What would you rather be if not a scientist?

A writer.

- What draws you to that particular occupation?

I like telling stories.

- Which scientist from history would you like to meet?

Richard Feynman. I had him for a huge lecture in physics and hated him. Videos of him make it clear he was a much interesting fellow than that obnoxious showoff in the lecture hall.

- What would you ask them?

Just about anything. I am confident we could get far and deep very quickly from almost any starting position.

- If you could guess, what do you think their answer would be?

I think he'd be willing to play. I just hope he'd be patient and let me keep up.

- How has the Internet influenced what you do other than in providing e-mail?

I try to avoid using it. It's a mind-numbing, thought quashing drug. It is desperately unreliable and an awful time-suck. Kids who won't/don't read any more latch onto the web as though it were real life and haven't the critical judgement to perform reality checks on the nonsense that comes gushing out of the white hole in their screens.

It is a wonderful source of egregious examples of careless, muddled thinking and poor documentation, so could be used as counter examples endlessly. Unfortunately libraries and other sources think it can substitute for substantial documentation and are working to reduce their physical holdings on the theory that the web can do it.

- Why do you think the public fears science?

All animals fear what they can't control, don't understand, and/or suspect may control/understand them.

- What can scientists do to gain more acceptance?

Pander to the lowest common denominator? "No man ever went broke underestimating the \*\*\*\*\* of the American public." -- H. L. Mencken

Science and the truth are not popularity contests to be won by 'acceptance'. Funding of course is; if the question is what can scientists do to get more funding, obviously what plays in Muncie, IN. To my mind, the function of science is to find out what's real, not build better public conveniences.

- What research goals should chemists/scientists set themselves for the next few years?

Understanding the biochemistry of disease and personality is vastly more important than interplanetary travel, with or without human(oids).

- What will chemistry/science actually achieve in the next ten years?

The chemical basis of neuroscience, personality and behavior. Maybe make psychologists into engineers and mechanics.

- What invention would you like to wipe from history?

It's the use inventions are put to that is the problem, not the inventions themselves. We have an enormous talent for frivolous, careless excess, only to bemoan the improvidence of our choices afterward.

- Why that?

Thinking before acting beats the other, hands down.

- What's your favourite chemical reaction?

$C_x(H_2O)_y + x O_2 \rightarrow x CO_2 + y H_2O$  (digestion)

- Which living scientist do you most admire?

Hard to say. I don't know any of the stature and humanity of Pauling or Feynman.

- Why them?

They were mensch. Despite being brilliant, they had a sense of commonality with humanity. Even when arrogant and self-serving, they were fundamentally decent human beings.

- Who would you like to see as the next interviewee (preferably a living scientist)?

David Baltimore

- What's their e-mail address?

President of Cal Tech. Must be a web site where you could look it up.

-- End --