

BROWN: Antics like Cyrus sideshow insult women's smarts

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Girls Preparatory students play with an interactive exhibit at the new National Museum of Mathematics in New York last December. (THE ASSOCIATED PRESS / File)

I'm offended.

I watched Miley Cyrus on the 2013 Video Music Awards and I was disgusted.

I'm not a prude. So it wasn't the twerking or the suggestive acts that bothered me.

Rather, it was what Miley thought of me and the rest of the audience, that her performance could or should be considered artistic expression.

I felt that my intelligence was being insulted — and that irked me.

To me, good art (which includes music, visual arts and theatre as well as mathematics) needs to be intellectual. A great artist needs install thought and creativity into his or her work, and should demand likewise on the part of the audience.

I'll take a great song by Joni Mitchell or the Indigo Girls over Miley-like performances anytime.

Now if Miley integrated mathematical concepts into her music, that would be interesting!

I just joined a national committee called Girls and STEM, where STEM stands for Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics. The focus of the group is to promote the sciences and associated fields as viable career opportunities for young women.

The committee is co-chaired by lawyer-author Maureen McTeer and astronaut Julie Payette, two extraordinary individuals, and there were many other brilliant women in the room. I felt honoured to be one of the men invited to join them.

The discussion turned to addressing why fewer women than men pursue the sciences. I put forward the crucial role that mathematic plays in this formula.

Lack of knowledge and success in mathematics is indeed a barrier to achievement in science, engineering and technology. Many girls, somehow, get the message that mathematics isn't for them.

In a recent study, less than one-third of all mathematics faculty at degree-granting institutions were women.

Why is that?

I searched through the research literature and found that while there really is no difference in mathematical ability or aptitude between girls and boys, there is a difference in their confidence about mastering mathematics.

But what is most interesting to me is that the biggest difference lies in how the genders differ in their stereotyping of mathematics as being in the male domain. While both genders show a bias to this stereotype, it is far more pronounced among men than women.

Male belief in this myth can deter girls from pursuing mathematics (as boy/men might make them feel less "feminine" for doing so), and subtle (or not so subtle) influences from teachers, parents and others can all push capable girls away from mathematics, and hence away from science in general.

So how can we best promote math and the sciences to girls?

A video called [Science, It's a Girl Thing!](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g032MPrSjFA) (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g032MPrSjFA>) produced by the European Commission encourage girls to choose science as a career, was played to the Girls and STEM group, to complete silence. The video is replete with attractive women in short skirts dancing, blowing kisses and giggling, with a male researcher who is obviously being distracted from his work.

Really?

If I saw a video like this on a sitcom like the Big Bang Theory I'd laugh my head off at the absurdity and offensiveness.

But I think we can make a difference. It is up to us men out there — fathers, teachers, employers — to encourage girls and help them persevere in mathematics, the gateway to the sciences.

About the Author »

BY JASON I. BROWN

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Find where a girl's interests lay - and education will happen. One area of interest many girls share is a love of horses. There is plenty of math and science in the real-world of horses, whether it is designing or riding a show jumping course, managing a stable, or judging conformation math is involved.

Many universities offer Equine Science programs and a great deal of research is being done internationally in saddle design, equine physiology and ethology. All of which require rigorous math and science skills and many of the researchers are women.

A project I am working on, Horse Lover's Math (HLM), is intentionally designed to encourage girls to stay engaged in STEM subjects by exploring the importance of math in the real-world of horses. HLM makes the connection between horses and math and science through content based on current equine studies, research and real-life stories.

For those girls who love horses, the motivation to learn and understand math and science is built in.

Deborah Stacey
Horse Lover's Math

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