

Robert Solow speech (4/26/07):

You know it's one of the great unsolved problems of economics whether praise is subject to diminishing margin of utility, we'll probably find out tonight, and I think I know the answer. I'm in no position to praise Padma's scholarship, especially not in this company, I simply don't have the intellectual wherewithal to do that; nothing I could say would count. But I can praise the scholar, and that's what I came to do.

I had a very good friend, now dead alas, a mathematician, a group theorist. In his vocabulary the supreme word of praise was "serious." "That's a serious piece of music," he would say, or "that's a serious painting," or "that's a serious bit of mathematics." Well Padma is a serious scholar, and I don't know any higher word of praise.

I think you know what I mean by a serious scholar. It's someone who has a well defined territory, a turf, something that she knows, and knows very well, works at hard, and all the time, and intelligently, and knows exactly how far her knowledge extends. Padma's like that, she's very tenacious about her view of the truth, and the important thing is, this much I do know, that in many important issues, her view of the truth has turned out to be the truth.

Serious scholars, generally, are not flashy. And the truth is, we lost Padma and Jagdish, by we I mean the Cambridge/Boston intellectual community and economics community, we lost Padma and Jagdish, partly no doubt because she's a woman, at a time when women were not getting a square deal in high-brow academe, but partly because she was not flashy. She cultivated her territory, she did it very well, but she... there's a baseball phrase that we sometimes use, we say that someone is "pitching within himself." That is to say he isn't straining, is using what he has in a smooth, clear, unobtrusive way, and that's Padma. In the end, I say we lost Padma and Jagdish in Boston, but in the end, she won, and you won, here at Columbia, and at New York.

I can also, legitimately, without feeling that I'm not "pitching within myself," praise Padma as a person. For all the time that I've known her, everything that she's done she's done with grace. And what I mean by that is, whether it's cooking a dinner or raising a daughter, or dealing with Jagdish, which can't be easy, as everyone seems to know, or teasing out the facts about the true movements of productivity in the Soviet Union from very imperfect data, to interviewing all those self-important Russians and getting them to say exactly what she needs them to say, without their knowing that it's happening to them, and doing all those things with no visible external sign of strain or even of effort. We know better, there's a lot of strain, and a lot of effort, but it's a lovely thing to watch.

I have stayed on Padma's good side all these years by not telling her how to do her business, and I'm not going to start doing that now, but if she could pass on a hint about dealing with Jagdish, I would be very grateful. Thank you.