

editor's note



DID YOU EVER PLAY THE GAME WHERE YOU TELL WHO YOU'D LIKE TO HAVE DINNER WITH? Sometimes you can pick a historical figure, sometimes a living person. If you ask my daughter, she'll immediately answer "Idina Menzel." Me, I think I'd choose Vi Hart. She claims to be a recreational mathmusician. But to me she's just plain brilliant.

I first became aware of her through her math doodles. These animated web vignettes both poke fun at the abhorrent state of math education in this country and also give just enough of a taste of some sophisticated math principles to make a student think that just maybe they should pay attention in math class. But I think her work with music boxes is even more fascinating. There's even a video of her feeding a Mobius strip through a music box. (Of course, some of her work, such as a paper on "Using Binary Numbers in Music" is simply beyond my ken.) If you get a chance, check out some of her work at vihart.com.

Of course Ms. Hart isn't the only one I'd like to break bread with. My childhood hero was Luther Burbank, the nation's greatest botanist. (Would we even have French fries today without his work? Or Shasta daisies?). But as an adult, it isn't a discussion of flora that interests me. Rather, I'd love to hear what this notorious free-thinker would have to say about politics and culture today. (Upon his death, a friend wrote: "...he was misled into believing that logic, kindliness, and reason could convince and help the bigoted." How can you not want to dine with such a man?)

And while some of the people you think you'd like to meet don't live up to your expectations, it's still always an experience worth having. Isaac Asimov was one of my favorite authors growing up (raise your hand if you can still quote his "Three Laws of Robotics"), but when I had the chance to actually meet him some 30-odd years ago his conversation didn't match the fascination behind his writing—though certainly my life wouldn't be as rich without the experience of having met him.

I recently attended a wonderful conference for association executives called The Great Ideas Conference. And while I learned some useful material from almost every speaker I heard, the greatest—and most valuable—information was garnered from the other attendees—and yes, some was during various sessions, some at dinner,

and some during formal networking events. The same has held true for each of the score of Steel Conferences I've had the pleasure to attend (this year the conference is in Pittsburgh beginning May 11—check out www.aisc.org/nascc for more details). Whether it was my first meeting of Socrates Ioannides in 1990 (the first person I met at a conference—we actually met in the hotel lobby while I was checking in), the chance to meet Gene Krantz ("Failure is not an option") in 2006, or my introduction to Joe Contrera in 2008 (check out his short course offering this year), the conference is always an opportunity to meet—and learn from—fascinating people. But of course it's not just the people, or even the sessions that makes the conference so interesting. This year I'm particularly looking forward to trying my hand at some welding. While the fire marshal discourages letting every attendee work with a live flame, The Lincoln Electric Company has come up with the next best thing. The VRTEX 360 is a virtual reality arc welding training tool. The user slips on a modified welding helmet, picks up a gun and it's the closest thing to being in the field. The combination of a realistic puddle simulation and arc welding sound—all tied to the welder's movement—provides a realistic simulation of a hands-on experience. (To get a feel for what you'll experience, visit www.youtube.com and search for VRTEX 360.) You'll even "see" sparks, slag, grinding and weld cooling!

And to add excitement, everyone who tries the weld simulator will receive a numerical evaluation score. Top scores will be posted...and prizes will be awarded to the top welders! I look forward to comparing scores with you!

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Scott Melnick".

SCOTT MELNICK
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