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Hans Bethe at Cornell

Daniel R. Schwarz

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Hans Bethe at Cornell

by Daniel R. Schwarz

(10/18/01):

“The beginning of the universe
must be older than the oldest stars.
I was called in when astronomers,
seemed to have shown
by their deft measurements
that the oldest stars were older than the universe.”
he says with a twinkle in his eye.
Speaking with his heavy German accent,
but lucid and witty, totally focused at 95,
gesturing, looking at his audience,
using overhead graphics,
he unravels the mysteries of the universe,
to an audience of thirty in a crowded elegant seminar room.
He speaks of giants and dwarfs among the stars,
even as we think we are watching a giant
among if not dwarfs us ordinary humans.

His phrases whirl about in the cosmos of my mind:
“In the core of stars;” “the temperature at the center of the sun”
His periodic silences — pregnant pauses —
reveal a mind at work, as hot and
active as the stars he describes:
“I spent lots of evenings on these problems
but not as much energy as the supernova.”
Isn't his mind like the “excited state of energy”
he attributes to the stellar world?

Listening, watching, I am puzzled by
“ $C+H \Rightarrow N$ 17 and $12C + 11 \rightarrow 13n + Y$ ”
Yet I find in the folds of his speech
a kind of order and his delight in the
pleasures of sharing his discoveries.
Five weeks after the twin towers tumbled,
I exalt in this affirmation of learning
in time of turmoil,
and am humbled.

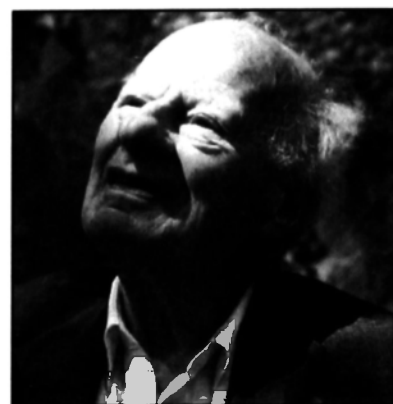


Photo courtesy Cornell
University

