April 15, 1988 (vol. 3, no. 16)

Dear Colleague:

G. N. Watson, a specialist on the works of the mathematical genius Srinivasa Ramanujan, wrote: "The study of Ramanujan's work and the problem to which it gives rise, inevitably recalls to mind Lamé's remark that, when reading Hermite's papers on modular functions, 'on a la chair de poule.' I would express my own attitude with more prolixity by saying that such a formula as,

$$\int_0^{\infty} e^{-3\pi x^2} \frac{\sinh \pi x}{\sinh 3\pi x} \, dx = \frac{1}{e^{2\pi/3}\sqrt{3}} \sum_{n=0}^{\infty} e^{-2n(n+1)\pi} (1 + e^{-\pi})^{-2}$$

$$\times (1 + e^{-3n})^{-2} \cdots (1 + e^{-(2n+1)\pi})^{-2},$$

gives me a thrill which is indistinguishable from the thrill which I feel when I enter the Sagrestia Nuova of Capelle Medicee and see before me the austere beauty of 'Day,' 'Night,' 'Evening,' and 'Dawn' which Michelangelo has set over the tombs of Giuiano de' Medici and Lorenzo de' Medici." (S. Chandrasekhar, Truth and Beauty: Aesthetics and Motivations in Science, 1988, p. 61).

Well, I used to think that's what a great University is about--a place where, confronted by the strange and the beautiful, one has "chair de poule." Nowadays, news releases from the university, university magazines and student newspapers give hardly a hint of this tingling sense of excitement. The capacity to wonder and to admire is eroded, except perhaps in the field of pure mathematics. One can still rejoice in a Ramanujan identity, because one is not distracted by questions of motivation and subtext.

Best wishes,