

Mathematics

Newsletter of the Department of Mathematics at the University of Washington

A MESSAGE FROM THE CHAIR



The events of September 11th cast a shadow over the start of the academic year, a shadow in whose darkness we continue to live. I struggled in the next few days, as we all did, with puzzlement about the meaning of our daily activities. What helped me gain a sense of purpose was the idea that it is

in our mundane daily activities that we invest life with meaning. In Genesis, we hear that "God created the human in his image, in the image of God He created him." At least metaphorically, we find in these words the notion that each human has within him or her a spark of the divine, the spark upon which each of us calls to bring meaning into the world. We do so not necessarily through our grander achievements but through the concern and passion we bring to our daily activities. Such a notion of the divine underlies the writings of the philosopher-theologian Martin Buber. He writes of the moment when something appears to the soul and demands the soul's creative power. For that something to become a work, what is required is a deed done with one's whole being: if one commits, creative power is released and the work comes into being.

I became department chair this past July, succeeding Don Marshall, whose three years of selfless efforts on behalf of the department have made such a difference to all of us. As chair during these difficult weeks, I have had the good fortune and consolation of observing, in the work of our faculty, students, and staff, the process that Buber described. Perusing this newsletter, you will get to share this pleasure with me, as you learn about departmental developments of the past year. I draw your attention in particular to the article about our late colleague Bill Birnbaum, a virtuoso on each instrument of the trio of research, education, and service. He provided an extraordinary example of a life of creativity and meaning, a divine life. His death last December saddened us all. Yet in remembering him we find much joy.

I invite you to read this newsletter and to be a part of the life of our department. Share with us your thoughts about the role of mathematics in your career or your memories of time spent here and people in the department. If you are in the area, come visit. And if you wish to support the activities of the department, your contributions will be most gratefully received. Thanks so much for your continuing interest.

- Ron Irving

Z. W. BIRNBAUM, 1903-2000



The Department's long-time colleague and friend Zygmund William Birnbaum passed away at his home in Seattle on December 15, 2000, at the age of 97.

Bill Birnbaum was born in Lwów, Poland, educated in Poland and Austria, came to the United States in 1937, joined the faculty of the University of Washington in 1939, and retired with the title Professor Emeritus of Mathematics and Statistics in 1974. He remained active in mathematics for many years after his retirement.

Professor Birnbaum received a law degree in 1925 and a PhD in mathematics in 1929 from the University of Lwów. After completing his doctorate, he went to Göttingen, Germany, then the major center of mathematics. There he had contact with many of the leading mathematicians of the day. While in Göttingen, Bill qualified as an actuary, and in 1931 he obtained a position in a Viennese actuarial firm. After a year in Vienna, he was sent to the firm's Polish subsidiary in Lwów where he served as the chief actuary. The firm went out of business in 1936, and a little later Bill came to the United States as a reporter for a Polish newspaper.

With the help of the UW alumnus Harold Hotelling, then professor at Columbia University, Bill obtained a position in our department in 1939. The rest of his academic career was spent here, except, of course, for brief visits to other institutions, American and European.

Upon his arrival in our department, Professor Birnbaum immediately began an effort to improve our program in statistics. Because of his efforts, our department had one of the first comprehensive undergraduate programs in statistics in the country. He instituted new courses and founded a Laboratory of Statistical Research, which he directed until his retirement.

Professor Birnbaum was a distinguished statistician whose work was recognized with many honors. He received Guggenheim and Fullbright awards. The American Statistical Association honored him with its S.S. Wilks Medal for "his theoretical research, wide applications, leadership, inspiration, and teaching". He served a term as president of the Institute of Mathematical Statistics.

In addition to his scientific work, Bill made important contributions to the department. For more information, see **BIRNBAUM** on page 2