

Comment

Hell is a karaoke cruise

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My brother Bryan and I were driving somewhere a few months ago when we passed a sign that advertised 'Karaoke Cruises'. For a moment we just looked at each other, and then he said "Can you imagine being trapped on a boat with a bunch of people doing karaoke at every meal? With no way to escape because you're at sea?" I shuddered. "It sounds like a definition of hell," I agreed. Which got me thinking. Over the centuries, people have defined hell in a variety of picturesque and imaginative ways. A favorite of mine is Sartre's "Hell is other people", a sentiment that every university professor can appreciate (it's also the name of a rock group, by the way - but I digress). My thought was this: what would constitute a definition of hell for a scientist in the post-genomics era? I submit the following as some possibilities, but would welcome additional suggestions from readers.

Hell is ...

... claiming that the number of genes in the human genome is N only to have your biggest rival announce that it is $N/5$.

... waking up at night with the terrible feeling that all that 'junk' DNA must be doing something.

... finding, for every one of the genes you're interested in, not a single BLAST hit.

... discovering that your favorite gene has absolutely nothing to do with cancer, Alzheimer's, or any other human disease.

... doing a BLAST search on your favorite gene and finding ten hits, all of which are annotated 'ORF of unknown function', and all of which are found only in obscure prokaryotes without a history of genetic analysis.

... falling in love, scientifically speaking of course, with an organism whose genome has not been sequenced and which

is so understudied that its genome may not get sequenced until 2050.

... having announced that the number of genes in the human genome is N only to have your biggest rival claim that it is really $5N$.

... having your grant not funded because it does not take sufficient account of the tools and results of genomics, then spending six months to revise it so that it does, and having it rejected again because it is no longer 'hypothesis-driven research'.

... having your political leaders, or your mother, ask you where all the promised big benefits to human health are now that the human genome has been sequenced.

... trying to write a grant for proteomics research and realizing that you have no idea what proteomics really is.

... studying a human gene that turns out to be expressed only in the appendix.

... realizing that you took all the wrong courses at the university. You took mathematics, physics, chemistry and biology; in the era of genomics you should have taken economics, computer science, sociology, business management, ethics and abnormal psychology.

... trying to do stem-cell research in the United States under the Bush administration.

... having grown up as a physicist with the sense of entitlement to funding for your big science projects and access to the corridors of power, only to find yourself suddenly living in the age of genomics, when biology is king.

... having been involved in sequencing the human genome and, when asked how many genes there are in it, having to say "Who knows?"

