



# A GREAT DAY for IU and BLOOMINGTON

## Elinor Ostrom Receives the Nobel Prize

Thursday, December 10, 2009

The **Diary** of  
Laurie Burns McRobbie.

IU's first lady and her husband, President Michael  
McRobbie, attended the Nobel ceremonies in  
Stockholm, Sweden.

Thursday, December 10, 2009—  
It's 3:30 pm in Stockholm, and dusk has already  
fallen. The lights of the Stockholm Concert  
Hall gleam in the cold, damp air as crowds of  
elegantly clad men and women make their way  
across the slick cobblestone square and up the  
broad steps of the hall. Undeterred by the cold,  
spectators are lined up, not to admire the ball  
gowns, mink coats, and tailcoats but to see the  
stars of the evening—the 2009 Nobel laureates  
in physics, chemistry, medicine, literature, and  
economics. One by one, in private cars, they  
arrive, men and women who have spent their  
careers in labs, libraries, and field research.  
They may have imagined winning the prize,  
but nothing prepared them for their sudden  
celebrity, the autograph-seekers lined up to  
greet them, and the flashbulbs of the paparazzi.  
Tonight is their night. They will receive their  
medals from the king of Sweden in a glittering  
ceremony watched on television around the  
world. Among them: Indiana University's own  
Elinor Ostrom.

Michael and I join the stream of guests  
going into the hall. We move through the line  
to check our coats and head up the stairs to  
find our seats. Along with the other members  
of Lin's party, we are in the first balcony,  
looking down at the rows of chairs on the stage  
where the past laureates and dignitaries will sit.  
At the front of the stage, an arc of 12 red chairs  
has been set up for the laureates, across from  
five ornate, high-backed chairs for the royal  
family. The mezzanine level just below us runs  
around the entire hall, and the orchestra, set  
to play selections from Mozart, Mendelssohn,  
Puccini, and Bartok, is positioned on the  
mezzanine behind the stage. The front of  
the mezzanine balcony is draped so thickly  
in flowers that it takes me several minutes to  
recognize what they are: white roses, white  
lilies, and a lovely flowering green vine. In  
the program I find their source: a florist in  
Sanremo, Italy, where Alfred Nobel lived the  
last years of his life and died, 113 years ago  
today.

At 4:30 pm the orchestra plays the Swedish  
national anthem, and we stand as King Carl  
XVI Gustaf, Queen Silvia, and other members  
of the royal family take their seats. Then the  
12 laureates being honored in Stockholm  
enter the hall to the strains of Mozart's "March  
in D Major." (Earlier in the day, President  
Barack Obama received his medal in Oslo,  
Norway, where the Peace Prize ceremony  
takes place.) Lin is resplendent in African  
dress and stands out among the more classic  
attire of her fellow laureates. They take their  
seats in "prize order," according to Nobel's  
will: first physics, then chemistry, physiology  
or medicine, literature, and finally economics.  
Each prize is introduced by a representative  
of the awards committee, speaking in Swedish  
(fortunately for us the remarks are translated in  
the program), with musical interludes between  
the prizes. Following remarks about the prizes  
themselves, each laureate is introduced. An  
elderly gentleman, moving in a stooped shuffle  
as though he has done this a thousand times,



Lin Ostrom receiving her Nobel Prize  
from Sweden's King Carl XVI Gustaf.  
Photo by AP Photo/Scanpix/Jonas  
Ekstromer/Pool



The stage of the Stockholm Concert Hall moments before the awards ceremony began. New laureates, past winners, the royal family, and other dignitaries all in place. Photo by Sipa via AP Images

lecture was not open to the public. The other laureates made up for the loss.

We heard the physiology or medicine lecture on Monday at the Karolinska Institute. Two of the winners were women, out of a record number of five selected in one year (and of course including Lin as the first female winner in economic sciences). The selection committees are conscious of how few women have been awarded the Nobel—41 prizes out of a total of 537, a number that includes both of Marie Curie’s Nobels in physics and chemistry. Since 1980, the prevalence of women among the winners has increased, which is a hopeful indicator of a change in climate for women scientists.

Tuesday was a big day for lectures; those in physics, chemistry, and economics were all presented at the University of Stockholm. Physics was first, and the winner of half the prize, Charles Kao, was given the honor of starting. As he suffers from the early stages of Alzheimer’s disease, the 80-year-old Chinese-born U.S. citizen sat quietly in the audience while his wife delivered a lecture on his work involving the properties of fiber optics. She told a wonderful story to start, of how in his early days he would stay late at the lab, which played havoc with their family life. She pressed him constantly to come home earlier, but he said he was doing important work that “will

shake the world!” She repeated her sarcastic response to him, “Oh, right, and you’re going to win the Nobel Prize!” It was touching to see the pride on his face and to know he was aware of the magnitude of this moment.

The chemistry lectures were all brilliantly done. The three scientists laid out in words and pictures their ground-breaking work in how proteins are made from RNA, each using videos to illustrate the mechanisms, often set to music. And then Lin had her turn, delivering a terrific description of her work showing how local stakeholders usually can achieve better outcomes in managing shared resources than can government or private industry. It was a timely message with the United Nations Climate Change Conference in Copenhagen on the horizon. Lin was headed there next; she is indefatigable in pursuit of her academic work, as an event the next day demonstrated.

The U.S. laureates and their parties were invited to have lunch at the residence of the American ambassador on Wednesday, and that evening the Nobel Foundation was hosting a reception at the Nordic Museum. Lin, who could have finally relaxed a little now that her lecture was done, would not. Instead, she inserted a visit to a major research institute in Stockholm with which she has been associated for many years. We went with her. On the way to the institute it was clear she wasn’t feeling well, but she followed through with her visit, which included a lecture, discussion, and small reception with the institute staff. We were in awe of her work ethic and her energy, while we simultaneously urged her to get some rest. To our relief, she skipped the evening reception and stayed in her room to prepare for the big day on Thursday.

## Thursday Evening

The award ceremony now over, we collect our coats and head out into the night to board buses for the banquet. It’s being held at the Stockholm City Hall in a huge enclosed courtyard. We walk past lines of young people bearing torches to light our way as we enter the temporary banquet hall. A second-floor gallery runs along one side, and a majestic staircase descends into the hall. Lights glow against the brick walls and there are flowers everywhere. If it weren’t for the TV camera suspended above the tables (the entire banquet is televised live), one could believe we were in a medieval castle.

The table setting has been designed specially for the banquet: gold-rimmed china in soft green and white, gold-plated silverware, gold-stemmed crystal, exquisitely silky linen napkins. We are seated at one of what must be two dozen long tables, each holding about 40 guests, set perpendicular to the main table that stretches the length of the room. We are directed to find our places quickly after being informed that once the king is seated, no one may get up until he does. It hardly matters, as once the dinner begins we are too swept up in the food and music to consider leaving, even temporarily.

We rise once again for the Swedish national anthem as the laureates, royal family, and other dignitaries descend the stairs and take their seats on both sides of the main table, 88

brings the diploma and medal to the king, who presents them to the laureate. As the king shakes each laureate’s hand, trumpets sound, and we all applaud as the laureate bows to the king, to the past laureates seated on the stage, and then to us. It’s clearly a breach of protocol to whistle and cheer, but we applaud vigorously and whoop as quietly as we can when Lin turns to the audience, her happy smile reaching us up in the balcony.

The ceremony ends with another playing of the Swedish national anthem, and the royal family exits. The families and friends of the laureates, however, head straight for the stage, our party among them. We are able to give Lin a hug before she is whisked off to the celebratory banquet, and to visit with the ancient keeper of the medals, who has collected them from the laureates to guard until later. They are gorgeous, heavy, and glowing in their blue velvet cases.

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## The Past Five Days

The awards ceremony is the culmination of a week that began when we arrived in Stockholm on Saturday, December 5, and quickly settled into our hotel near Stockholm’s Gamla Stan (Old Town). The days leading up to the ceremony have been jam-packed, brutally so for the laureates who had interviews, press conferences, receptions, and dinners from morning to night. And, of course, they each had the lecture of a lifetime to deliver. We attended all of them, except Herta Muller’s. The literature winner is deeply shy and not comfortable speaking at length in anything but her native German. So her

Lin, Michael, and me after the banquet. Photo by Steve Hinnefeld



# What I Learned About ALFRED NOBEL

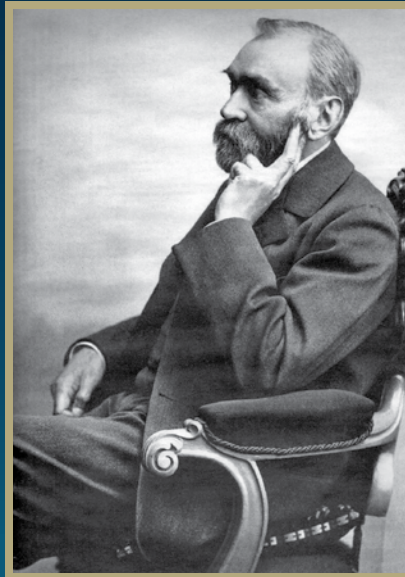
Alfred Nobel (1833-1896) is widely known as the inventor of dynamite and the man whose fortune allowed him to create the Nobel Prize, still the most prestigious and generous among academic awards (about \$1.4 million for each prize this year). But not much beyond this is general knowledge—at least it wasn’t to me before arriving in Stockholm. Nearly every aspect of the original five prizes—physics, chemistry, physiology or medicine, literature, and peace—was specified in his will, including the institutions that would make the selections.

Nobel was born in Sweden but grew up in St. Petersburg, Russia, and traveled widely as an adult. His knowledge of the worlds of industry and discovery was as global as possible in his lifetime, and he could have selected any number of renowned institutions to award the prizes. It was not parochialism that led him to choose institutions in Sweden and Norway—united countries under one king during his lifetime—it was their relative incorruptibility. He believed that the organizations he picked would operate with the greatest degree of independence and objectivity. And so he chose the Karolinska Institute for physiology or medicine, the Swedish Academy for literature, the Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences for the prizes in physics and chemistry (and in 1968, when the Sveriges Riksbank established the prize in Nobel’s name, economic sciences), and a committee of the Norwegian Parliament for the Peace Prize.

Nobel also was clear that he wanted the prizes to go to meritorious individuals and organizations from any country. For five years after his death, his executors worked to settle or otherwise fend off competing claims to his estate as well as objections to the provisions of the awards, notably from the king of Sweden and Norway who wanted them to be awarded only to Scandinavians. That his executors were successful is fortunate for the many deserving scientists, statesmen, and writers from around the world who have received the prize since 1901, and particularly fortunate for Americans this year, as 11 of the 13 current laureates hold U.S. citizenship.

Nobel also, oddly, specified that the prizes should go for work done in the previous year, a provision that was immediately ignored by the selection committees. This fact was mentioned, however, in the context of President Barack Obama’s Peace Prize, a topic of much discussion in Sweden as it has been in the United States. —

Laurie Burns McRobbie



I ring out the evening...dancing with wild abandon to a techno band, safe from the humiliating eyes of my children.

people in all. We toast the king, then Alfred Nobel, and the feast begins. The first course is for the ears and eyes, as a madrigal group sings a beautiful tribute to a white-robed singer who answers them from a flower-draped Juliet balcony. Then, on cue, 200-plus waiters, who have competed for the honor of serving at the banquet, simultaneously bring all 1,300 of us lobster consommé. We eat and talk to our table companions until the soup is cleared, and then the singers entertain us again. Truffle-stuffed quail with lovely potatoes and vegetables come next, followed by another performance, and finally we're served an exquisite mousse,



Lin enjoys a laugh with Nobel laureate in medicine Professor Jack W. Szostak during the banquet in the Stockholm Town Hall. Photo by AP Photo/Scanpix, Claudio Bresciani

each course accompanied by multiple pours of champagne, red wine, and dessert wine into the appropriate [Swedish-made] Orrefors crystal. The rumor is that it will take three months to do the dishes.

Toward the end of dinner, one laureate from each of the five prizes makes a speech. Lin has conceded this honor to her co-winner, Oliver Williamson of the University of California at Berkeley, which turns out to be fortuitous for her as Herta Muller upstages all of the other presenters. Speaking in German through a translator, she gives an impassioned cri de coeur against totalitarianism and dictatorship, based on her experience as a German Jew in Romania under Nicolae Ceausescu. We are rapt and overwhelmed.

Dinner ends, and after the main table has recessed up the stairs, we do, too, arm in arm with our table companions (in Swedish fashion, Michael and I are not seated next to each other). We make our way into the Prince's Gallery, a huge room tiled in glittering mosaics, to find a swing band and dancing in progress. Bars stocked with excellent champagne and wine are set up at each end of the room. We get out on the floor twice but it's more fun to watch. We are enchanted by the sight of Charles Kao, who, despite his Alzheimer's, dances flawlessly with his wife and daughter, his face alight with joy. Lin stays for about an hour, watching the dancers as well, but then excuses herself to "rest on her laurels" and call it a night.

Midnight rolls around, but the evening is far from over. We board buses again, this time

for the After Party, reportedly the event not to be missed. Each year it is thrown by students and rotates among the major educational institutions in Stockholm. This year the medical students of the Karolinska are our hosts, and they have spared little expense, time, or creativity in getting the Institute ready for the big night. Their theme is The Body, and we enter at The Brain, greeted by students who explain the layout. There are rooms devoted to everything from an "Archipelago of Senses" to a "Construction Site" (bones), including a cigar area and an oxygen bar (lungs) and The Out of Body Experience (dreams). There are four bands, buffet tables of food, and more bars serving drinks invented for the occasion (a Nobel Negroni, a Dynamite Daiquiri) and more French champagne. We make our way along The Spinal Cord to find another swing band, and then find a couch near The Liver (where things your liver has to deal with, like sugar and alcohol, are in plentiful supply) to admire the decorations, people-watch, and enjoy the excellent jazz trio. I ring out the evening in The Cardiac Club, dancing with wild abandon to a techno band, safe from the humiliating eyes of my children.

It's 3 am when we finally board the bus back to the hotel. Despite the hour, we are not tired, still buoyed by the energy and pride we have felt throughout the evening and indeed the whole week. It is a marvelous thing to experience such an ultimate celebration of intellectual achievement. Hats off to all the laureates—and especially to our own Lin Ostrom! ✨



We visited Mistra, the Foundation for Strategic Environmental Research in Stockholm, on Wednesday afternoon. Michael McGinnis, co-director of the Workshop in Political Theory and Policy Analysis founded by Lin and her husband Vincent, is behind Lin. Photo by Laurie Burns McRobbie



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