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Sent: Fri 1/6/2012 10:30:24 PM
Subject: I bet this was the main subject when he met with you!

As famed physicist Stephen Hawking turns 70, the subject that most occupies his thoughts is not how the universe arose from nothing, or how he's been able to live with neurodegenerative disease for so long. Here's what he thinks about most: "Women. They are a complete mystery."
That's the bottom line from New Scientist's interview with Hawking, timed to coincide with this weekend's birthday celebration at Cambridge. The theorist is almost completely paralyzed due to his decades-long struggle with amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, or Lou Gehrig's disease, and had to provide his answers by laboriously twitching his cheek to operate a computerized speech-translation system.

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Hawking also listed what he saw as his "biggest blunder in science" (his now-repudiated insistence that information was destroyed in black holes), the most exciting development in physics during his career (the discovery of the big bang's imprint in cosmic microwave radiation) and the potential discovery that would do the most to revolutionize our understanding of the cosmos (discovery of supersymmetric particles at the Large Hadron Collider).
But it's his brief comment on women that attracted the most attention: How could it be that a scientist who has plumbed the deepest mysteries of the cosmos finds himself mystified by women?

Based on the view most folks have of geniuses, how could it not be?

The saga of the super-smart professor who is flummoxed by interpersonal relations, particularly with the opposite sex, is at least as old as Sigmund Freud (who famously wondered, "What does a woman want?"), Jerry Lewis' fictional "Nutty Professor" and the stereotype we have of Albert Einstein. It's as up to date as the TV astrophysicist on "The Big Bang Theory" who can't say a word to women unless he's under the influence.

Somehow, folks get a satisfying sense of karma from the idea that geniuses are socially stupid. But the stereotype doesn't really hold true, particularly in Hawking's case.

Like the real-life Einstein, Hawking has had an active romantic life, marked by two marriages. (Einstein's second marriage ended with the death of his wife and cousin Elsa; Hawking's ended in an ugly divorce.) Hawking's disease does not affect his sexual ability or his potency, and the fact that he's fathered three children is evidence of that.

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"The disease only affects voluntary muscle," Hawking's been quoted as saying.

He's been called an "incorrigible flirt" and a "party animal who likes to dance in his wheelchair." Having seen Hawking playfully chase his grandson around a backstage room in his wheelchair after a Seattle lecture, I can readily believe the "party animal" part. And having seen the way his expressive eyes light up a room, I know he can turn on the charm despite his disability.

Through the years, Hawking has had a special thing for Marilyn Monroe. A picture of the enigmatic blonde hangs in his Cambridge office, and Hawking once told The Guardian that if he could travel back in time, he'd rather meet Monroe than the great physicist Isaac Newton, who "seems to have been an unpleasant character."

Even as he approaches the age of 70, Hawking seems to have kept his playful, pleasant, mischievous character. That may help explain his latest comment about the mystique surrounding women, as well as his own mystique to women. Here's a classic example: Actress Jane Fonda was clearly won over last year when Hawking came backstage after her performance in a play about a woman musicologist in the early stages of neurodegenerative disease. "I took his hand and carefully uncurled the fingers one by one, wanting to see how they felt and looked ... soft, pale, safe," she recalled in a blog posting.

When Fonda asked Hawking what he thought of her performance, Hawking typed out a short response: "You were my heartthrob" — which got a big laugh. Fonda came away starstruck. "This man who cannot move or speak, can, nonetheless, comprehend the incomprehensible," she wrote.

Hmm ... Maybe women aren't such a complete mystery to Hawking after all.

More about Stephen Hawking:

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- 'There is no heaven,' Stephen Hawking says
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