

The Shovel

A friend came up to me one day and asked, "What is that?".

"A shovel", (periodic table) I replied, a little surprised by his ignorance.

"What is it good for?" he asked.

"Well", I replied, "you can dig holes with it for one thing. But here is the really interesting thing:

It measures your heart rate.

You can tell time by it.

It is made of iron and wood, two very significant things.

It is a model of all chemistry and physics.

No one has disputed it for over 100 years.

It has been referenced in the scientific literature 1,683,000 times.

It is a conceptual thing; you need a PhD. in physics to fully understand it.

It is the basis for quantum physics, which explains everything.

Thomsen, Bohr, Pauling, Schroedinger all based their theories on it."

"So, what is it good for?", he asked again.

"Digging holes" I replied.

"So why the big sales pitch about mostly useless stuff?", he asked.

"Because you need to know its history, philosophy and connection to physics, otherwise you won't understand its relevance."

"Nonsense", he replied and then picked up the shovel and dug a hole.

I stood there somewhat aghast that he would immediately dig a hole in my front yard.

"So", he continued, "it (periodic table) is a tool."

"A very sophisticated tool", I pointed out.

"It is a tool.", he said, "Nothing more."

After my speechless pause...he asked "So what is it supposed to do?"

"Determine valences", I replied, forsaking everything I had learned about chemistry until then, yet still hanging on to the one thing I knew was true.

"It is not very good at that", he replied and then walked away.