King Lear and Dr. Watson

Douglas McCormick

Editorial Director, *BioTechniques*

“Being a genius is no guarantee against acting stupid.”

—Victor Serebriakoff

Much has been written about James Watson’s Lear-like fall and departure from Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory, which he built and headed with such energy through more than four decades. It seems to us, though, that the accounts leave out one important element or another. This month, we present not our words, but the words of the principal actors in what we can only see as a tragedy.

On Oct. 14, Charlotte Hunt-Grubbe published “The elementary DNA of Dr Watson” in the *Sunday Times* of London, a profile of Watson, then touring England to promote his latest memoir, *Avoid Boring People*. Hunt-Grubbe is a frequent *Times* contributor who in 1996 spent a “stint” as one of several students recruited by Watson to work at Cold Spring Harbor while living with Watson and his wife. The profile runs more than 4,000 words, offering, on the whole, an affectionate appreciation. Near its close, however, came 158 words that would rock one of the great careers in science.

He says that he is “inherently gloomy about the prospect of Africa” because “all our social policies are based on the fact that their intelligence is the same as ours—whereas all the testing says not really”, and I know that this “hot potato” is going to be difficult to address. His hope is that everyone is equal, but he counters that “people who have to deal with black employees find this not true”. He says that you should not discriminate on the basis of colour, because “there are many people of colour who are very talented, but don’t promote them when they haven’t succeeded at the lower level”. He writes that “there is no firm reason to anticipate that the intellectual capacities of peoples geographically separated in their evolution should prove to have evolved identically. Our wanting to reserve equal powers of reason as some universal heritage of humanity will not be enough to make it so”. (1)

Apologies

One wishes that Hunt-Grubbe had looked Watson in the eye and said, “Jim, that’s really stupid.” Or, better, that some inner voice had warned him before the words were out.

That inner voice did speak up, but after the fact. On Oct. 18, Watson made an agonized apology before the Royal Society.

I cannot understand how I could have said what I am quoted as having said. I can certainly understand why people, reading those words, have reacted in the ways that they have. To all those who have drawn

the inference from my words that Africa, as a continent, is somehow genetically inferior, I can only apologize unreservedly. That is not what I meant. More importantly from my point of view, there is no scientific basis for such a belief. (2)

That same day, the Cold Spring Harbor board of directors announced it was suspending Watson from his post as Chancellor.

On Oct. 21, Hunt-Grubbe (who had the fatal speculations on tape) weighed in with “Science always has and should be open to debate,” a *Sunday Times* commentary defending Watson and pleading for mercy.

His views are often unpredictable and invariably cause controversy and so I sought a balance, one that reflected his eccentricities but also brought home the magnitude of his contribution to science and continuing devotion to disease research.

I can’t support those few, perhaps unguarded, comments he said to me but I can say that he works tirelessly to encourage scientists from all backgrounds and countries. Whatever his views about society, he ultimately cares about great science, whoever it is executed by... I am not trying to destroy a brilliant scientist and I am genuinely horrified by the response. We need to squeeze every last drop of brilliance from this man if we are to continue hoping to unravel the genetic causes of disease. He strives to help young people in their careers. My biggest concern is that, by helping me, he has damaged himself. I could not hope more, that I am wrong. (3)

Resignation

Early on the morning of Oct. 25, Cold Spring Harbor announced that Watson was resigning. Later that day, Watson issued his own announcement, which closed,

This week’s events focus me ever more intensely on the moral values passed on to me by my father...and by my mother...To my great advantage, their lives were guided by a faith in reason; an honest application of its messages; and for social justice, especially the need for those on top to help care for the less fortunate. As an educator, I have always striven to see that the fruits of the American Dream are available to all. I have been much blessed. (4)

Half-baked notions of racial genetics have spawned more nonsense than any other sector of science. Some are just silly, others are poisonous filth. Few of us are totally free of their taint. We’ll leave it to each reader to decide, on the evidence, where this case falls. For our part, we are deeply sad, and recall what our mother used to tell us, “Love the sinner. Hate the sin.”

References

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