

Pipe dreams

What was your first experiment as a child?

My chief technician at the time, my younger sister Gail, remembers our studies on crayfish: "We would catch the crusty little bug-gers by dangling pieces of hot-dog on the end of a string. When they pinched, we'd toss them in a bucket and bring them home, and Mom would make us leave them overnight on the porch. Next day we'd dump them back in the pond and start all over again. We must have caught the same dozen crayfish hundreds of times. I imagine a whole crayfish mythology has arisen around those mysterious disappearances and reappearances. Like people who are abducted by aliens."

Who has been the most important mentor in your career?

This is an incredibly difficult question. I have been extremely fortunate in having had a series of excellent mentors at nearly all stages in my career. During the past few years, I have given seminars at my high school and colleges, and many of my mentors have attended. As I mature, I realize how important it is to thank them as they have given so much of themselves to help me achieve.

Whose graduate student would you most like to have been (historical impossibility notwithstanding)?

Maybe T. H. Huxley. But the supervisor/student relationship is like a medieval apprenticeship, and the interpersonal chemistry is hard to predict. And would he have taken a female student?

What book has been most influential in your scientific career?

Books? Aren't those the things that provide insulation in one's office and decorative accents in one's home?

What literary character would you employ as a postdoc?

Daedalus. He had family problems, of course, but hopefully they wouldn't interfere.

Which field in science (apart from your own) deserves more funding, and why?

High-risk/high-pay-off research. Funding agencies are far too conservative, so the most creative ideas may never get beyond the stage of dreams.

You have the audience in your hands, but some smart-alec asks you the killer question you have no idea how to answer. What's your response?

The wonderful thing about being over 40 is being able to say: "I don't know. I'm so glad you brought that up. Let me think about it."

What book currently resides on your bedside table?

J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit*, *The Crucible of Creation* by Simon Conway Morris and *Sparks of Life* by James Strick. I am dreadfully behind.

What music heads the playlist in your car or laboratory?

The wonderful thing about the iPod is that I can give you an answer to the megabyte. So, in megabyte order: Celtic music including a hefty amount of bagpipe; sea shanties and other folk music; baroque and early music; classical; Gilbert and Sullivan, musicals, ragtime and jazz.

Assuming the dead can be raised and/or time travel exists, who from the world outside science would you most like to have dinner with?

Benjamin Franklin. He had it all: charm, scientific insights, and was at the nexus of world politics. And, by all accounts, he was quite a ladies' man.

What one thing would you rescue from your burning laboratory?

Right now I am blessed with two outstanding technicians. Naturally I have told each that they would be it.

What would you have become, if not a scientist?

Probably a historian of science, or an environmental lawyer. I briefly flirted with each, and was told by the relevant professors that I would miss doing science too much. They were, of course, right.

What previously underrecognized sport or pastime should be included in the Olympic Games?

The contestants are given a bag of spinach and asked to isolate the DNA, purify the ribulose-1,5-bisphosphate carboxylase, and separate the rRNA from the mRNA. This would be a timed trial with certain as-yet-undetermined constraints, but leaning towards the low-tech.

Do you have a burning ambition to do or learn something of no practical or immediate value?

I have been learning bagpipes. But it is of practical and immediate value: it clears my mind and house, and gives me pleasure.

You've just been told (in confidence) that the world will end tomorrow. What would you do next?

See if there was anything I could do to get off with my family, as in *The Hitchhikers' Guide to the Galaxy*.

Harry Potter or Lord of the Rings?

Harry Potter. If I don't give this answer my



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ten-year-old will break off all diplomatic ties with me, even if I am his mother. However, I have now seen *Lord of the Rings* and it should be rated PG50. But, in fairness, my parents did warn me.

Due to an unexpected change in Earth's rotation, days now last 25 hours. How will you spend the extra hour?

Ah, but it will happen due to the frictional interaction between Earth and our dear Moon. But sadly not in our lifetime. No doubt I would spend it bemoaning the fact that we weren't up to 26 hours yet.

The host at a dinner party has placed you next to God. What would you talk about?

Hmmm. A type 'A' personality with an obvious sense of humour. This would be my plan on going in:

Appetizer: Why are you talking to me?

Main course: What is your role? How did life originate and evolve? Are we alone in the Universe(s)?

Sorbet: What happens after death?

Dessert: What is your take on religion?

After-dinner drinks: What do you want me to do now?

You're the only scientist at a party. How do you describe what you do for a living?

"Investment banking? Really? How nice. I look for life on Mars."

What's your motto?

Omniscience tempered by amnesia. ■