

# A thirst for knowledge

*Summarize yourself in the form of a title of a paper in Nature.*

Evidence for the emergence of order from chaos.

*What was your first experiment as a child?*

A basic newtonian physics experiment on mass and gravity in which I pulled a wall down on top of myself, sustaining a leg wound that needed more than 50 stitches and a painful eight-month convalescence. I concluded that medicine is not an experimental science.

*Who has been the most important mentor in your career?*

Eraldo Antonini and Alessandro Finazzi-Agro' from Rome and — much later, upon appreciation of their professional achievements — my mother and father.

*What makes a good scientific mentor?*

Lots of discussion, and most importantly patience and appreciation when the students don't listen to advice. My common experience is that the best ideas originate from discussion, and are generated in the pub, providing a forum, an atmosphere within the group where creativity can flourish. But the data require extreme rigor.

*What gives you the most job satisfaction now? What are your major frustrations?*

My greatest satisfaction is designing new experiments. My greatest frustration is trying to write their results into original papers.

*What single scientific paper or talk changed your career path?*

Conversations with Jeffries Wyman, attempting to explain the relationship between nature, beauty, symmetry and the allosteric effects of haemoglobin.

*What's your favourite conference destination, and why?*

Keystone, Colorado, because of the mountains, the skiing, the people, the science and the time to discuss it.

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

"Whereas a first analysis seems to accord with your suggestion, a closer investigation reveals unexpected levels of complexity."

*What was the worst/most memorable comment you ever received from a journal?*

Receiving a letter of acceptance, and later the galley proofs, of a paper for somebody else; I was strongly tempted to correct them,

adding my name as co-author. I also enjoyed being asked to act as referee for my own paper. (I declined.)

*What book is currently on your bedside table?*  
Aristophanes' *The Wasps*. It is incredible how modern it is, even after 24 centuries.

*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?*

True to my Italian roots I'd go for a large dinner with plenty of room for discussion: there'd be Socrates to discuss whether knowledge has advanced at all since his time; Galileo to ask what he thinks of patents; Julius Caesar to ask what he thinks of the European Union; Pericles to hold forth on the modern balance between technology, politics, the military and lawyers; Vivaldi to comment on Eminem's harmonic structure; Michelangelo to discuss the 'cut-and-paste' nature of modern creativity; Dante to update his *Divina Commedia* with most recent important people; Wittgenstein to dismantle any concept brought forth by these encounters; Sappho to report the event; the *Monty Python's Flying Circus* team to film it — but, most important, Bacchus to organize dinner.

*You are on a plane behind two students obviously going to the same conference, who start to talk about your work. What do you do?*

I would introduce myself as 'my arch-rival', criticize my methods and generally discredit myself with lies and vicious slander, and see how they reacted. Then of course I'd introduce the real 'me', do a proper criticism of my work and invite them all for a good session in the pub.

*What do you most dislike about having research published?*

Having to read it a few years later.

*The Internet is the bane of scientists' lives because...*

...we can't think quickly enough! The net is a very powerful instrument, allowing more and faster communication, especially at a distance. Science pretends to reach truth (like art) through objectivity (unlike art): the findings of the individual must be ratified by the consensus of the many, and hence communication in the form of meetings, conferences, published papers and so on is indispensable. Science is a recent manifestation of a general class of discourse known as 'representation'. Older examples of the genre are labelled either sacred or profane, and are performed in churches and theatres, respectively. No surprise then that some scientists act like priests,



Gerry Melino

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and others like actors! In all cases a plurality is required to expand the discussion; here the net is fantastic. But in our line of work some time is needed for concepts to sink in and for the full ramifications of findings to be contemplated. No amount of flashy technology beats what each of us carries between our ears.

*What do you do to relax? (Please bear in mind that Nature is a family journal.)*

What do you mean 'family journal'? I'm as pure as the driven snow!

*Harry Potter or Lord of the Rings?*

Well, Harry Potter has the same dreams, fantasies, experiments and problems of communication as many scientists...

*What would you have become, if not a scientist?*

An artist. Science and art are fundamentally imaginative. The popperian idea of science is based on conjecture and refutation. But the conjecture in science, as in art, necessarily comes first.

*What's just around the corner?*

The beginning of molecular research on memory and learning.

*Name one extravagance you can now get away with because of your eminence.*

I could never match Luc Montagnier, whose house was broken into and a number of things stolen. But when the robbers saw his name on the credit cards, they recognized it as the name of the man who discovered HIV, and returned everything. His house was never broken into again. Now *that's* eminence. ■