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THE FIRST WORD/ THE STOCKS ON THE VILLAGE GREEN

James Watson resigned in mid-April from the U.S. National Institutes of Health's genome project, apparently in an angry rebuttal to the NIH director's insistence that Watson's stock holdings in biotechnology and pharmaceutical companies appeared to present a conflict of interest. That got us thinking about small towns and Caesar's wife (as in "pure as Caesar's wife," or "be like Caesar's wife").

Patrician Rome was a small town in Julius Caesar's time—a few hundred families. Among them was the odious Clodius, a stripling rake who was (Plutarch says) "in love with Pompeia, Caesar's wife, and she had no aversion to him."

Well, during the feast of the dryad Bona (during which all Y chromosomes were required to quit the house), the beardless Clodius disguised himself as a singing girl and crept into Caesar's house—with the connivance of Pompeia's maid. The lad, oafish as well as amorous, was soon discovered and driven out.

Caesar divorced his wife. And for violating the ceremonies, Clodius was brought up on charges amounting to sacrilege and treason (pretty much the same thing at that time and place). At the trial, though, Caesar refused to denounce Clodius. Why then, the judges asked, did you part from your wife?

"I wish my wife to be not so much as suspected," Caesar replied.

Among those who still use the expression, "Caesar's wife" generally refers to an innocent, pure and beyond reproach. It comes up a lot in discussions of conflict of interest. If we are going to go on the Caesar's wife standard of public purity, it's worth remembering that in the original case, there was clearly something fishy going on.

We used to live in a small New England town—a few hundred families. For the most part, the people who lived there loved the community: they based their businesses there or in neighboring towns; they volunteered; they ran for and held community office. One of the town's most visible politicians drove a truck—we should say, the truck—for the road department. Another owned the general store. Another owned the only tire shop for miles around (and thus did supplied the tires for the town's three vehicles). Some sold real estate. Some worked farms. One had been a crew foreman at the thread mill; another's family had owned the mill.

When you have a small town like that, with people committed to working in it and developing it, the appearance of conflict of interest is inevitable—and real corruption is rare.

Well, biotechnology (or applied molecular biology, call it what you will) is still a relatively small town. The world's population of biotechnologists would barely fill the city of Cork. Port Arthur, Texas, (Janis Joplin's much-maligned home town) would hold every biotechnologist in North America.

Neither community is big enough to support a cloister of scientific monks, ascetics divorced from the world, pledged to poverty, ready to fill the pulpit of each new public parish.

So what is the alternative? Consider: In the course of his or her work, a researcher comes across a commercial group that does things absolutely right—the right people, the right strategy, the right technology. Look, she says to herself, this is the only thing I know enough about, care enough about, to judge: I want to be a part of this. She "signs on," buys stock, offers services, tries somehow to help or be of use.

Almost inevitably, those who know most and care most become most deeply enmeshed. Certainly, one is not necessarily honest because one is wise, nor wise because one is smart. Corruption is obviously possible, but it is not synonymous with commitment or involvement.

Yet mere involvement seems to be what we are pillorying our best people for. From here, the standard of monastic separation seems as unworkable as it is unreasonable.

As Caesar observed (in the *Gallic Wars*), "Men [and women] willingly believe what they wish to believe."

—Douglas McCormick