

# Reflections on a MacArthur Fellowship

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The news generally comes out of the blue. The process of selecting MacArthur fellows is confidential. Nominations are made by a small group of designated persons not publicly identified, and the selection is in the hands of a committee whose membership also is not made public. There is no way to apply for a MacArthur fellowship. Two dozen or more fellows are selected each year. They come from a broad range of fields—poetry, history, science, medicine, and community action are examples. MacArthur fellows get their checks quarterly for 5 years, with the amounts determined solely by their ages at the time of their awards. No strings are attached—no progress reports, no promise to work on one or another topic, no accounting for the use of funds, not even requests to help the MacArthur Foundation in its future activities.

My own MacArthur fellowship came in

July 1990. It was not quite totally unexpected: A good friend had let me know some time earlier that I had been nominated. Still, the news left me almost speechless. And the award changed my life in some important ways. First was the immediate sense of freedom. I had retired from the US Public Health Service a few years earlier and was working a combination of part-time jobs at McGill University in Montreal, the *New England Journal of Medicine* in Boston, and the Department of Health and Human Services in Washington, DC. I had picked and developed each of those activities, and I found them very satisfying, but it was a hectic life that often left me with little energy or interest in other things. The MacArthur award changed that, and I soon left the work in Boston.


Close on the heels of the sense of freedom was a sense of responsibility. How could I use this gift to accomplish something that would otherwise be out of reach? A substantial part of the time freed up was devoted to continuing my research on cancer, but some time was left over. I soon settled on writing a book, but it was many months

before I could determine which of several competing books to pursue.

Third was a recognition that the award itself was having an impact on my professional life, both directly and indirectly. There is a “Wow!” factor that is related to the 5 years of generous and unsolicited support, and I find that it continues after the end of the fellowship. I have no doubt that the award was also important in some of the opportunities that I have had since that time.

Finally, there has been a long, slow sense of frustration about a book not yet written, in part because I have been attending to some other activities that I continue to regard as important.

The book has gone through much evolution, from a narrow focus on misconduct in science to a much broader focus on how science progresses. There are many distasteful things about misconduct, but perhaps the worst is the effect that it can have on progress, including the false leads and the deception and misdirection of other investigators who might have used their own time, effort, and grant support to better advantage. The evolution of the book has caused



me to bring in such additional matters as academic tenure, sources of bright new ideas, the differences between exploratory and confirmatory research, the roles of quantitative analysis, peer review and publication, selection of future scientists and steps in their training, dealing with the news media, and many other topics that have been new to me, although I find that there is much in the literature about them. My task as I see it now is to bring these together into a comprehensive view of what science is and how we move ahead.

The book has also gone through a second kind of evolution. My first objective was to

write a technical treatise, but with time this changed to something for the educated public, then to a textbook for new scientists in subjects that few of them have an opportunity to study. I hope that it will, in part, fill some of the gaps in present training programs and guide and supplement the mentoring that many new scientists need.

I now have a couple of bookshelves full of materials, including a lot of still “drafty” text. I need to revise the outline; organize my notes, fragments of text, and source materials; and then find the time for serious study and writing. This is likely to take at least another 5 years (alas, the same period that I

first expected would be needed to finish a book). In the end, I will have material for a lot of talks (some already given), some papers (which will be chapters, with one published), and the book itself, which I will find satisfying because it has caused me to think hard and to learn. If it pleases others, too, so much the better.

People and institutions, including the MacArthur Foundation, must change with the times, and I understand that major changes in the fellowship program have been discussed. I hope that it remains much as it is now. For me, it has provided a perfect combination of stimulus, support, and freedom. 