

Who Do You Think You Are?

Who do you think you are, in your dreams? Charles Darwin, Marie Curie, Mr. Spock? Do you remember the fantasies and ideals and role models that led you into science as a profession? I remember mine.

Early on, there was The Genius. I thought that becoming, say, Albert Einstein, would impress my parents and help me win arguments. Einstein was a particularly good role model because his mother didn't make him comb his hair or wear ties, and he spent his time at an Institute for Advanced Thinking riding bicycles. Louis Pasteur was good too, at least in the Paul Muni version. Also, these men had, in a sense, achieved Immortality. I've since mostly given up my aspirations to Genius and Immortality (having realized, with the help of Woody Allen and Mel Brooks, that my chances of immortality, in the sense that actually counts—"not dying"—are "practically none"), though winning arguments and not wearing ties remain important.

Another figure became attractive in adolescence: The Rebel/Iconoclast. There was Galileo, of course, and Semmelweis, and, ultimately, Prometheus. The problem is that a really big price sometimes comes with this role (like Galileo's incarceration, or Semmelweis's career, or Prometheus's liver), and posthumous vindication never seemed very satisfying to me. The iconoclastic ideal still has some appeal, though, as it is closely related to science's reverence for evidence and reason. Notwithstanding its credentialism, science still has an antiauthoritarian, egalitarian tradition that welcomes plebian practitioners (Faraday, Mendeleev, Ramanujam). No wonder first-generation college graduates and the children of immigrants in the United States are disproportionately represented in its ranks.

Of the trinity of Western ideals—the Good, the True, and the Beautiful—I believed in the primacy of The True. The three are intertwined, and all are noble, but contributions to the Good and the Beautiful seemed more likely to be lost by political reversals or material decay or even changes in fashion. I still feel that there is something more durable about scientific

contributions, though, sadly, it turns out that they too can be lost, or even discarded. There is also a sense of power in the scientific quest to uncover the secrets of the universe, to boldly go where no one has gone before. Popular culture fears this power, that it may be coupled to hubris (Dr. Frankenstein, Dr. Teller, Dr. No), and the True be dissociated from the Good. The great embodiment of this theme, of course, is Faust. It seems to me, however, that the Faustian bargain is a bad deal even for a mortal soul.

I would list the virtues of successful scientists as curiosity, intuition, drive, focus, and integrity, with some rigor and flexibility of thought thrown in. These virtues are not unique to scientists. The Christian Virtues¹ used to provide and mark the path to salvation as the final reward, and the Seven Mortal Sins² were the hindrances to be assiduously avoided. Now, it seems, the Sins denote the rewards. Pride is the big one for scientists, fulfilled by achievement, prestige, honors, and self-esteem. Greed, once scorned, is becoming popular. Lust still seems mainly the reward of athletes, rock stars, and politicians, although I did once hear the expression "National Academy Groupie."

An old fantasy that's been coming back, as I start to meet the age requirement, is to become a Sage. There are a number of variations on this figure; all, however, are privy to secret or comprehensive knowledge. Many are magical or spiritual, Wizards and Seers. That's not who I mean, though I'm quite fond of Yoda. I mean the likes of Maimonides or Goethe or Franklin. One big plus to being a Sage is that you needn't be ascetic. Another is that you needn't be perfect. There's room for debate as to qualifications and even as to the location of the fine line between humbug and wisdom—consider The Wizard of Oz and Sancho Panza. As Handelsman said in a *New Yorker* cartoon: "I think I've acquired some wisdom over the years, but there doesn't seem to be much demand for it." Still, it can't hurt to hang out a shingle, maybe write some editorials.

Martin Zatz
Editor

1. Prudence, Temperance, Justice, Fortitude, Faith, Hope, Charity.

2. Pride, Greed, Envy, Wrath, Lust, Gluttony, Sloth.