

The Golden Age

Several of our colleagues were elected to the National Academy of Sciences last year. I learned of it from people eager to pass the news: "We got four people into the Academy!" and "Four of us got into the Academy!" Note the "we" and the "us," as if it were a collective achievement, or the elected had been chosen to represent SRBR members, or our home team had gotten into the playoffs. Such language expresses pride in felt community and the hope or presumption that the successful hunter will share his PNAS slots with the village.

Can the rest of us take pride in the achievements of the elect? (Sure, why not? Does no harm. Better than resentment and backbiting.) We want to share in the glory, fame, and achievements of others, even their blatantly individual achievements. We see them as *our* champions. We feel the luminance of the prominent can provide a lasting glow to those of us who are, or were, associated with them, or just know them or, in strong enough cases, were merely spoken to or touched by them. Their karma can be transmitted; it rubs off, at least a little. We may display autographed pictures of the famous embracing us or shaking hands with us, next to diplomas and certificates, to show off our credentials and our history.

We need to mark and share and celebrate (often retrospectively) major achievements, to turn them into communal events and tribal history. We need to honor our champions and our elders, to talk about the remembered Golden Age. We have speeches, ceremonies, banquets, and festschrifts to bind us together. I think it's a bit different for those who've settled in and those who've arrived relatively recently. The former, long in their traces, use these opportunities to recall and reassert their idealism, to reminisce and remember their youth, with its aspirations, and hope, and

potential, and energy, and, like war veterans and anti-war activists, to say, "I was there when it happened. Yes, I was there. Oh, wasn't that a time?"

They also want to teach, inspire, and impress the young. To teach and learn the sagas is part of the process of recruitment, entry, and full acceptance into the tribe. As for reminiscences, whether an old war story is fascinating or just elicits yawns depends on how good the story is and how well it's told. They're sometimes inspiring in a way different from that intended. For the young, the time dimension is compressed. They think 5 years is a really long time. Tales of remembered scientific prowess may be heard as out of date, relatively straightforward, and relatively easy. "I could do that. Probably better." Of course it looks easy retrospectively: the ideas have been absorbed and become mainstream, the methods have become widespread and are available in a kit or from a company. Still, "I could do that. Probably better. Just watch," is, with a little self-discipline, just the attitude we want to inspire. But the achievements in question provide only an abstract model. There is an old maxim: When a Nobel Prize is awarded for the outcome of work using a certain approach to a problem, do NOT pick up on that approach to that problem. (That train has left the station.) Find a different approach or a different problem and make your own major advance. We hope you will.

Let us, then, honor our champions, for their achievements, and for the pride and karma they bring us, and for the inspiration they provide us, and for their PNAS slots. And remember: Now will be the Golden Age a generation hence.

Martin Zatz
Editor