ACCEPTANCE OF THE HENRY BALDWIN WARD MEDAL FOR 2018: A FASCINATION OF THE ABOMINATION

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Good afternoon. I want to sincerely thank everyone for coming today, particularly in light of the many potential distractions afforded by this venue. It really is an honor and a pleasure to be here. I want to begin by thanking Dr. David Marcogliese, who was the 2001 recipient of the Ward Medal, and Dr. Cam Goater, both of whom went to great lengths to nominate me for this distinction. Beyond the nomination itself, I am grateful to them for their insights, guidance, and enthusiasm over the years, tracing all the way back to my early days as a graduate student. And, of course, thank you to Dr. Janet Koprivnikar for that enlightened and only slightly embarrassing introduction. More importantly, I thank her for being a dedicated collaborator and co-conspirator throughout much of my scientific career. Our interactions have taught me more about parasites and parasitology than any class or textbook, including their remarkable suitability for being featured in cartoons. Even within a field known for its nuanced sense of humor, Janet is in a league of her own—which I mean in the best way possible.

Traditionally this presentation is focused on telling the scientific and personal journey of the award recipient. Sitting down to do this was much harder than I expected—you come to realize how much we focus on the presentation of our science, rather than our own story and experiences. Being an academic, I naturally looked to past recipients for inspiration. This, unfortunately, made developing my own comments exponentially more difficult; reading over the past speeches was a remarkably humbling endeavor. Truth be told, I have often felt like a bit of an impostor at these meetings. I am not a parasitologist, or at least not in the classical sense. I have never taken a parasitology class, nor were any of my official graduate or undergraduate advisors trained in the field. But one thing that has long-amazed me about the field of parasitology generally, and the American Society of Parasitologists (ASP) in particular, is its welcoming culture. The number of “card-carrying” parasitologists—including many folks in this room—who have gone out of their way to help me over the years is astounding. And while I didn’t realize it early on, the legacy of Henry Baldwin Ward has gently supported me through much of my career, as I will revisit later.

A FASCINATION OF THE ABOMINATION

When asked to give a title for my talk today—which admittedly was several months ago—I elected to use “A Fascination of the Abomination,” which traces back to Joseph Conrad’s novella Heart of Darkness (Conrad, 1899). It alludes to people’s near-pathological need to look upon or experience things that are arguably horrific. Whether it’s rubbernecking at an accident scene, watching a horror movie, or riding a roller coaster, humans have a strange inclination to flirt with terror. This fascination often involves a complex set of emotions—relief that the event in question hasn’t happened to us combined with the fear that, one day, it could. Yet Conrad’s book was also about a quest into the natural world, and when it comes to science, a key additional motivation for this fascination is to understand how, precisely, such things happen. Nineteenth-century scientists were obsessed with studying morphological variation and its role in natural selection (e.g., Bateson, 1894), including the evolutionary potential for hopeful monsters or non-gradual jumps in development (Van Valen, 1974).

Ultimately, my intrigue for parasites comes from this fascination of the abomination. What I mean here is not that parasites are horrific or frightening per se (even if many find them so), but more about the remarkable and awe-inspiring things that even seemingly invisible organisms can do to individual hosts, to communities, or even ecosystems. Who needs science fiction when we have parasites? (Although I confess I’m a sucker for creature flicks.)

As part of this talk, I had to ask the question—how did I first become interested in parasites? I was supposed to become a marine biologist. My family is from southern California, and we spent most summers camping at Carpinteria State Beach—and, yes, that’s the same Carpinteria made scientifically famous by the research of Drs. Armand Kuris and Kevin Lafferty. Long before I’d ever thought about parasites, I would head out to the tidepools at dawn—often armed only with a flashlight and a bucket—and spend as much time as the tide would allow. This instilled in me a deep love of biology for all of its diversity and especially its mysteries. You really never know what the retreat of the tide might expose on any given morning.

Because we couldn’t camp all the time, I used money earned from my paper route to establish temperate reef tanks in my parent’s living room, often combining various aquariums and mini-fridges from garage sales. I learned a lot about species coexistence in those days, and specifically which species didn’t play well with one another. Over the years I kept octopi, spider crabs, stingrays, leopard sharks, sea anemones, urchins, and countless others. I further discovered that some animals are much