

PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS: NOTHING SUCCEEDS LIKE EXCESS

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To the members of the American Society of Parasitologists, I offer my appreciation for the opportunity to serve as your president. When I was notified of my successful election as an officer, it brought to mind that famous remark by Adlai Stevenson who said, “In America, anybody can be president. That’s one of the risks you take.” So, what I initially perceived as somewhat of a risky venture, proved to be a more valuable and interesting experience than I anticipated. Let’s hope that my presidential address has a similar outcome.

Before preparing my presentation, I spent time reading many ASP presidential addresses, and I’ll be borrowing ideas of past presidents for my talk. Although I could try to pass off my review of these addresses under the guise of “research,” I must make a couple of confessions, which just reflects my Catholic upbringing. First, I haven’t always attended presidential addresses. For example, when John Oaks was delivering his presidential address at the Hawaii meeting in Kona, I was immersed in the warm waters of Kealahou Bay, snorkeling on the coral reef. In any case, having recently read John’s address made me appreciate the wisdom of publishing them in the *Journal*. And, second, I confess that I was uncertain about what direction I should take with this talk. And my library research did very little to clarify matters. Presidential addresses in our Society have run the gamut of topics. Some have been detailed scientific presentations akin to a rather long symposium talk (e.g., Norman Stoll’s 1946 address entitled “This Wormy World”). Ruminations on the current status of our society have been the primary focus of others, and these often include a kind of “call to arms,” challenging the membership to meet our anticipated needs (e.g., John Oaks’ aforementioned 1998 address entitled “What Does the Millennium Have in Store for the American Society of Parasitologists?”). Several addresses have expounded on entertaining issues such as parasitologists who infect themselves or the practice of ingesting parasites for their taste and nutritional qualities. Both Lillian Mayberry (in 1996) and Robin Overstreet (in 2003) expounded on these themes. Other presentations defy easy characterization, but they might be described as eclectic explorations around the crossroads of the scientific enterprise, society, personalities, current events, and of course, parasites. Addresses that fit this description include Clay Huff’s 1955 address entitled simply “Parasitism and Parasitology” and Sherwin Desser’s 1995 address, entitled “Peeling the Cosmic Onion”—a title I always tend to think of instead as “Parasites in Outer Space.” Now, my initial reaction to this diversity of approaches was to consider taking what I perceived to be the easier path, i.e., discussing one research topic that is within my “comfort zone” in a standard way. However, I quickly rejected this idea, not that I am overly industrious, but because the possibility of trying something novel intrigued me. So, please bear with me this afternoon as I risk working outside

my zone of comfort and take a somewhat meandering path as I reflect on scientific careers and our scientific society.

In his play “A Woman of No Importance,” the Irish playwright Oscar Wilde wrote that “Moderation is a fatal thing. . . . Nothing succeeds like excess.” I took this phrase as the title of my address because I believe it applies at many levels in both our personal and professional lives, and this will be a recurrent theme throughout my talk. I would imagine that at least some of you already use this Oscar Wilde quotation. For example, when I teach evolutionary biology, I ask students to remember “nothing succeeds like excess” as a catchphrase for describing evolution by natural selection, rather than the more popular phrase “survival of the fittest”, which is a somewhat tautological expression coined by Herbert Spencer, not Charles Darwin. Wilde’s phrase captures the essential aspects of evolution, i.e., those individuals who leave more offspring (excess) do so because they have greater relative fitness, whereas merely surviving particular environmental challenges, while good for the individual organism, does not yield the change in gene frequencies that results from underlying heritable fitness differences. Shifting now to our professional activities, I would suggest that it is another type of excess—the focused intensity of effort and dedication in our professional lives that often leads to success in our research and teaching endeavors. This afternoon I will also try to convince you that if the American Society of Parasitologists is to continue on the path to success (rather than merely surviving), each of us is going to need to put Wilde’s quotation into practice with respect to investment and involvement in society activities. If I am successful, I will convince most of you to reject the idea put forward in another very famous Oscar Wilde quotation, notably, “Duty is what one expects from others, it is not what one does oneself.”

Before I delve more deeply into my views of what ASP needs from its members, I want to note that my introduction to the desire for “excess” in scientific matters was not through the theater, but instead via my graduate mentor at LSU Medical Center, Dr. Joe Miller. Joe provided all his graduate students with a copy of a commencement address by a former ASP Editor and President, Dr. Justus Mueller (Mueller, 1961). That address was entitled “From Rags to Riches, or, The Perils of a Parasitologist,” and it was delivered in 1961 to the SUNY medical class, where Dr. Mueller was professor of microbiology. In this remarkable address, Justus expounded on the unexpected twists and turns in his life as a parasitologist, something that many of us can understand. For example, after completing his doctorate in 1928, he quickly came to realize that among biologists at that time, parasitologists were regarded, as he phrased it, “the pariahs of the scientific caste system.” He suggests in his address that there was some question among his scientific colleagues as to whether parasitologists should be regarded as scientists. That this view was common enough would seem to be independently verified by the topic of Maurice Hall’s 1932 ASP presidential address, entitled “Is Parasitology a Science?” You will be relieved to know that Dr. Hall vigorously

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