The American Society for Cell Biology

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New Year's Resolutions

It is a great honor and pleasure to greet you as the new President of your Society. I know that you expect a great deal from me. Past presidents have all served you with outstanding vision and dedication. They have tirelessly promoted the core missions of the ASCB, helped balance the needs of different constituents with the resources available, and found ways to grow the Society and increase its influence. In the year ahead I will try to live up to their examples.

I also will have to take on another challenge—to try to help everyone, and particularly young members, maintain a sense of optimism and enthusiasm in the face of the huge economic setbacks the world is experiencing. These economic problems will likely last several years. They will affect us all, whether we are chairs trying to balance department budgets, investigators resubmitting National Institutes of Health (NIH) or other grants, postdoctoral fellows applying for jobs in an ever-tightening market, or teachers trying to support families on a low income.

Brigid Hogan

One of the greatest driving forces to keep us motivated in the face of these difficulties is a burning passion for science. The joy to be gained from scientific inquiry and discovery was in evidence throughout the 2008 Annual Meeting in San Francisco. It was just as forcefully conveyed by students and postdoctoral fellows at their posters as by winners of awards at their special lectures.

So how can we maintain our enthusiasm for science, and stay innovative and creative when there is so much to discourage us? I would like to propose two scientific "New Year's Resolutions" that may help us stay motivated and energized. These resolutions are, of course, in addition to the others that we have made, such as to exercise more, reduce our carbon footprint, and support our local communities!

Resolution 1: Think Outside the (Cell Biology) Box

When faced with reduced funding or a decline in resources, it is easy to "hunker down" and to concentrate more and more on a few ideas. You feel too pressed to learn about something new, or you tell your students to focus on one particular project. Of course, focus is a good thing—especially for students and postdocs! But there is a great deal to be gained from thinking outside the box and viewing issues from a different perspective.

By taking time to learn about other people's research, you may suddenly recognize an unexpected link between your problem and one that has just been solved. Or you may discover a new technique that could be applied to your own material. Alternatively, you may realize that your experimental approach could help solve a completely different question being studied by someone else.

So I would like to encourage you all to take time to learn about a topic that is very different from your own. Go to a seminar by an outside speaker that you would normally pass over and, what's more, take a student with you. Read a paper or commentary in a journal that you would otherwise ignore, and then discuss it with your colleagues afterwards. Another approach would be to follow a link in PubMed from a paper in your field and then see where it takes you.

For members attending the ASCB Annual Meetings, the rich selection of talks and posters provides many opportunities for such lateral thinking. In addition, for the past two years the meeting has included "Working Groups." At these sessions a few leaders in a field present different aspects of a problem and then open the session to discussion from the audience. Organizers choose topics to be either controversial or particularly amenable to new and collaborative approaches. These sessions have been very successful. There is no reason why a similar approach could not be tried in a much smaller venue, for example in a departmental or institutional retreat.

One of the goals of these groups is to introduce the idea that lively discussion and arguments can be fun. Unfortunately, young scientists from some cultures or backgrounds

may not feel comfortable arguing with senior people or presenting alternative ideas in formal seminars. Informal "working groups" can help to overcome these reservations and introduce the idea that discussing science and challenging experts can be fun and very stimulating for everyone.

Another way to think outside the box is to ask how your research might relate to complex biological questions such as organ development or repair after injury, or to a human disease. There have been some outstanding examples over the past few years of quite unexpected connections between cell biology, developmental biology, and disease processes. Two that come immediately to mind are the link between nuclear lamins and progeria, and between cilia and the multiple developmental defects seen in patients suffering from disorders such as Bardet-Biedl and Meckel-Gruber syndromes, known collectively as ciliopathies. (See the July and December 2008 *ASCB Newsletter* stories on this research for more information.)

The ASCB is highlighting these examples in stories disseminated to community newspapers and to legislators and their staff to bring attention to the need for more NIH funding for basic research. (If you'd like to help disseminate such stories at your institution and to your elected officials, visit www.ascb.org/progeria and download and forward this example.) Sharing such stories with your colleagues can also help highlight how unexpected interconnections bring together scientists working in different fields, inspiring and invigorating their research.

Resolution 2: Communicate More about Our Research

An excellent way to become re-energized and regain the child-like enthusiasm we once had is to explain to someone who works in another field, or who is not a scientist, why we find our work so interesting. This can be a real challenge, but the effort also has the potential to be very energizing. I find that people are usually fascinated to know about what cell biologists do, and they crave to learn more about the mysteries of life.

There are many ways in which we can communicate our excitement about cells, and the ASCB is here to help. For example, at the ASCB Annual Meeting, sessions focused on talking about science to our neighbors and discussed outreach to legislators. In addition, a workshop showed how we can make or correct Wikipedia entries. (The February 2009 *ASCB Newsletter* will feature more information about these sessions.) Wikipedia is now widely used by young people to learn about science, but the information related to cell biology is often inadequate and out of date.

Another example of how the ASCB promotes science communication in unconventional ways is the decision to place the winning Celldance contest videos, premiered at the ASCB Annual Meeting, on YouTube. There they have the potential to reach a huge audience, including people who might never open a newspaper or even watch TV.

Indeed, we as scientists need to think much more about the changing face of journalism and take advantage of the new and alternative routes to communicate science to the public.One example of this was the video placed last year onYouTube by neurobiologists at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. The video was made in response to the criticism by Alaska Governor Sarah Palin, then a vice presidential candidate, of federal funding for fruit fly research. Her comments implied that money spent on studies on flies could have "little or nothing" to do with human health problems such as autism. The video showed how basic research using *Drosophila* was illuminating the function of neurexins, proteins localized in neuronal synapses. Abnormalities in neurexins have been implicated in cognitive disorders in people, including autism. This video was an effective way for scientists to defend and explain their work to a much larger audience than they could otherwise reach without extensive resources. In addition, 2008 E.B. Wilson Medalist Martin Chalfie explained the importance of the research on http://airamerica.com.

In future columns I hope to feature members of the ASCB on how they stay enthusiastic about science, and how they help communicate this to others. I will also showcase examples of how we as a Society can help scientists and scientists in training from disadvantaged communities, who are particularly vulnerable to economic downturns, to stay motivated about their work and build their careers. Working together, and keeping our resolutions, we can make 2009 a fantastic year for everyone in the ASCB. ■

Comments are welcome and should be sent to president@ascb.org.

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