

Better late than never

Among the questions that have come up quite often during my first few months as Editor-in-Chief of *Science* are those that concern the Retrospectives that we publish on prominent scientists who have passed away. Does a Retrospective serve as a tribute? Do we run Retrospectives on individuals who made important contributions to science but had other well-known personal drawbacks? Why can't we feature more diverse members of the scientific community in Retrospectives? These have been passionate inquiries that made me wonder about whether we should just stop publishing these pieces to avoid any strife.

After much debate, *Science's* editors decided that it's important to continue publishing Retrospectives. These are an enduring and important part of the scientific record. And a Retrospective is unambiguously a tribute. Generally, we look for someone who can write a personal reflection, relating stories and insights about the individual that stem from the intersections of their lives. It's unreasonable to think that these stories would be anything but positive. So, we're going to remember folks who we feel deserve tribute, and even then, we know there will be disappointments because we simply can't highlight everyone. But we can widen our Retrospective lens. The majority of prominent scientists who are passing away are still mostly white males because they constitute the majority of individuals who were given opportunities to excel in science in those generations. The time will eventually come when more women and people of color will be remembered in Retrospectives. In the meantime, we could seek more diverse voices in these reflections, and we could recognize more diverse individuals who have contributed to the scientific enterprise in ways that are as meaningful as a Nobel Prize.

Which brings me to this week's Retrospective on Stanley Cohen (see page 1307). Certainly, Cohen—who won the Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine for discovering nerve growth factor—is deserving of a Retrospective. But Cohen correctly shared the prize with Rita Levi-Montalcini, with whom he worked at Washington University in St. Louis, Missouri. As quoted in today's article, Cohen said of their work together, “On our own we were good and competent. Together we were mar-

velous.” Unfortunately, when Dr. Levi-Montalcini died in 2012, *Science* did not run a Retrospective on her. No matter the reason, it was a bad oversight. We missed an important opportunity to praise a remarkable role model for women pursuing excellence in science.

This is important to me because I still hold my faculty title at Washington University, where I have the high honor of being the Rita Levi-Montalcini Distinguished University Professor. I never knew Professor Levi-Montalcini, but I am inspired every day by her extraordinary life story. She went to medical school at the University of Turin and began research in neuroscience immediately after. However, when Mussolini's *Manifesto della Razza* (Manifesto of Race) was issued, Jews could no longer hold academic positions. When Germany invaded Italy, her family fled to Florence where they survived the holocaust in hiding.

While in hiding, Levi-Montalcini set up a lab in her small living quarters where she examined chicken eggs under a microscope. She wrote that during that time, she would ride trains and read scientific papers while admiring the countryside and smelling the hay. Most scientists can identify with reading scientific papers while on the proverbial hayride of a research career.

On one of those hayrides, she read a paper by the embryologist Viktor Hamburger that changed her life. She went back to her makeshift lab and began the experiments that would lead to the discovery of nerve growth factor. When the war ended, Hamburger

invited her to St. Louis to work with him for a year. She stayed for three decades and forged her collaboration with Cohen.

My colleagues told me many stories about Levi-Montalcini and her graciousness and elegant forcefulness. She was passionate about science and unfettered inquiry. In her Nobel Prize acceptance speech, when describing how Mussolini's fascist directive was signed by 10 scientists, she put “scientists” in quotes. She later became a senator in Italy and died there at the age of 103.

Glad we finally got her tribute into *Science* where it belongs.

Better late than never, Rita.

—H. Holden Thorp



H. Holden Thorp
Editor-in-Chief,
Science journals.
hthorp@aaas.org;
@hholdenthorp



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