



# Being Counted

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As the congratulatory e-mails arrived, I realized my Nobel Prize put me on lists. The rabbi, who had married my wife and me, said I was the second Chemistry Nobel laureate he had married, and my postdoctoral advisor, Sydney Brenner, who won his own Nobel in 2002, claimed I was his fifth postdoc to win a Nobel. I had become a collectable. I joked about these lists with my dentist, who surprised me by saying I was his fourth, but only if he could count David Baltimore's father.

The lists multiplied. Harvard, where I went to college and graduate school, and Columbia, where I have worked for thirty years, claimed me. I became known as the second person from my high school and the second person from my college class to win the prize. For all I know I have also been claimed by the elementary and junior high schools I attended, and maybe even the Dy-dee Wash diaper service that issued me a certificate of graduation my mother kept and I now display in my office. I know I was claimed by the prep school where I taught before going to graduate school. And people often tell me I am the first laureate they have met (although one woman on finding out I was a laureate, looked at me and said, "You're kidding. Right?"). Finally, two members of the Columbia Chemistry Department asked me if I would accept a joint appointment, presumably so they could include me on the departmental list of laureates.

Most of these lists, like my dentist's list, are amusing and innocuous. Some are even justified, since places that educated or employed me could argue they deserve some of the credit. But a recent request from a science teacher for material he intended to display in a private high school for Jewish students made me ponder the meaning of some lists.

I was bothered because he wanted to display only material from Jewish Nobel laureates. Although I was raised Jewish and am proud of my heritage, I do not practice my religion. More importantly, I do not feel this aspect of my life had any significant impact on my science, except perhaps that I was raised to question what I learned. Thus, I was uneasy about being included in a list of Jewish scientists.

In particular I feel this cherry picking of laureates goes against one aspect of science and of the Nobel I particularly admire: success depends on what you have done and not who you are. The prize Osamu Shimomura, Roger Tsien, and I shared demonstrates this principle rather well, since we have

different backgrounds and different heritages. Perhaps most importantly, religion, like the color socks we wear or our favorite foods, is both unknown and irrelevant to what we did scientifically. I have no idea if either man is religious, nor should I.

I feel being included or excluded because of religion or any other extraneous trait is dismissive of who I am and what I have done. In particular, the teacher's request reminded me of an experience I had working in a factory in 1966. One day I expressed my opposition to the Vietnam War, when one of the workers said, "Oh, but you're against the war because you are Jewish." In one line he dismissed my arguments and me.

I wrote to the teacher explaining why I did not feel comfortable being on his list. To my surprise, the teacher replied saying he, too, had misgivings, but thought he should use this approach to generate support for the display from the school's administration. The teacher also remarked that another laureate wrote to say the request had come by mistake. Despite having a Jewish-sounding name, the laureate was not Jewish. Nonetheless, he would send the school a picture. The teacher intended to display this picture, perhaps in his classroom if the school objected to its inclusion in the main collection. I could now join this group. I sent a small, signed version of the Nobel poster, the one showing Osamu, Roger, and myself. No matter where the poster hangs, it will show all three faces and acknowledge the science of my co-winners.

But I still am troubled. These lists attempt to connect the list maker with someone that, frankly, a small group in Sweden decided to honor. I am grateful people want to include me, but I can't help thinking they should honor the work and not the people.

In my travels I often hear people wonder when their country will produce a science Nobel laureate, when they will join that particular list. To me, the reason involves the need for long-term support for independent and basic research, not a deficit of any particular country or its people. After all, many people from other places have earned Nobel Prizes working in the United States. The list of Nobel laureates already shows that scientific accomplishment knows no boundaries. Putting people on exclusive lists denies that science is universal. Special lists are probably inevitable, but we should recognize that what joins us is much more important than what separates us. We should all be counted.

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