

Remarks on the occasion of the acceptance of NOGLSTP's Scientist of the Year award

First of all, let me thank you, Shelley, and all the members of NOGLSTP. I cherish this award and your recognition more than I can easily express. For me, it embodies the intertwining of two fundamental aspects of life that are usually viewed as being distinctly unrelated. I have been doing science throughout my entire adult life; but for even longer—as long as I can remember, in fact – I have been trying to make sense of my feelings. Both quests have been difficult but rewarding explorations of Nature; both are very personal and very human. Each exploration has profoundly guided the other, and each continues to this day.

I understand that NOGLSTP makes this award in order to promote an appreciation of the role that our community plays in advancing scientific progress. But I'd like to call your attention to another connection between doing science and being queer.

Like Hans Christian Andersen's ugly duckling, we have, from an early age, the inchoate sense that we are different. And in so many subtle and not-so-subtle ways, and through both unconscious and deliberate actions, our peers, our families, our cultures push us out of the mainstream. And so early on, many of us begin to drift away into our own solitary worlds. It is then that many of us begin a lifelong fascination with the worlds of ideas and exploration – in large part because we are gay kids.

What a great way for the Creator to ensure that humanity reaches for the stars! Design into the marvelous human genome something that makes some significant percentage of us not feel comfortable on Earth. To be sure, I started exploring Nature simply because it is something fundamentally suited to the human mind. But because I was growing up in a culture where there were no knowable outlets for the urges I felt, I didn't suffer the distractions that plague the normal adolescent. I was first confused and then for years I was embarrassed by my affections. So I sequestered myself in the natural world that I found in rural Iowa and suburban southern California and hid out in the worlds I found in books. What marvels there are in those places -- the woods, the pasture, the beach, the library. For me it was hemiptera, humus and heros, rather than Helen, Heather, or even Harry. In a word, I became a nerd.

Through those formative adolescent years, I couldn't figure out how I fit in to the culture around me. How fortunate, I realize now, that confusion was, because it imparted to me the desire to truly know myself and the world around me! One part of my character that I particularly value, I owe to my being gay – early on, I began to value and to seek the truth. What a privilege and a joy it has become to be a professional that is engaged, first and foremost, in the pursuit of knowledge. How many *other* professions share scientists' and engineers' goal – to find out how things really are, how the world really works?

Kerry Sieh
Sunday, February 19, 2006
St. Louis, Missouri

Throughout my early adult years, I did a long stint with Christian fundamentalism, working and praying to find solace and truth there. I failed, of course, because the intelligent designs of the real Creator are not susceptible to dogmatic dictates, to re-engineering by sheer force of will, or to unscientific cures. It took a long time to realize that the god that I was engaging there was just too small.

Well, enough personal history. Let me conclude with a few general opinions about our role as gay and lesbian scientists and technical professionals in the world to come. It was the expressed wish of the founders of the United States that all be given the liberty to pursue happiness. Between 1776 and 1945, Americans fought two wars on our own turf and two wars abroad, in large part to advance that cause. Liberty and the pursuit of happiness for queer folk continue to be a battlefield. Our fellow countrymen are being told that we are a threat to their own liberties and happiness. On the contrary, through our professions, our affections and our searchings, we help far more than we hinder.

I wish that this were our only battle. Unfortunately it is but one ongoing battle of a much larger struggle being waged on many fronts. The outcome of that struggle will profoundly influence the fate of humankind for centuries to come. It will test the proposition that humankind can act rationally, on knowledge and with technology that is being provided mostly through the scientific enterprise. Can we be compassionate, even in the face of dwindling natural resources and ever increasing exposure to natural disasters? Can we truly love and nurture the great diversity and wonderful complexity that exists in Nature? Can humanity be part of a sustainable biosphere, if we don't gain better control of our burgeoning numbers and our voracious consumption? I am skeptical that we will win this struggle.

But if we do, we will owe the victory in no small part, to the work of people with unusual sensitivities to the natural world and affections for its inhabitants. I am blessed to be among a small group of just such people here today. Thank you.

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