

Comment

What if Watson had said "Apes evolved from man"?

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I should have kept my big mouth open. I don't think it was largely cowardice that prevented me from speaking up; at least, I'd like to believe it wasn't. I think it was a combination of excessive politeness, shock-induced paralysis, misplaced reverence, and not knowing what to do. But if I'm honest with myself, I have to admit that there was an element of fear in there, somewhere.

By now, unless you read this column via satellite transmission to some distant galaxy, you probably know most of the facts about the forced resignation of James Watson, the legendary co-discoverer of the double helical structure of DNA, as Chairman of the Board of Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory. You know Watson was forced to resign because, during an interview with a journalist in Britain, he made some outrageous comments about the intellectual capacity of black people - and I don't have to say "allegedly" here because there is a tape record and besides, he never denied it. When confronted about it later, he simply said that he couldn't believe he had said it. He never said he didn't believe what he said. And in the flood of stories that broke about the incident, there were many comments to the effect that people weren't all that surprised - that he had a history of making disparaging public comments about women and ethnic minorities.

Now, the purpose of this column is not to pile further approbation on someone who's down. His legacy has been tarnished and he's had to step down in disgrace; anyone who wants more punishment is being vindictive. Nor is it to lament the ammunition that someone with the cachet of a Nobel Prize, the godfather of the Human Genome Project, has given the racists and bigots. In matters of racial prejudice no one is going to be swayed by some authoritarian figure (if you don't believe me, look up William Shockley the Nobel prize-winning physicist who is also remembered for his offensive racial views). Nor is it to discuss freedom of speech versus political correctness. I think most people

agree that Watson has the right to say what he said, but that Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory also has the right to choose the public face of their institution. Nor is it to debate the nonsensical idea that there are racial differences in native intelligence: a friend of mine put it perfectly when she said that Watson's remarks were not only beneath contempt; they were also beneath comment.

No, I want to talk about something that nearly all the newspaper stories and outraged editorials passed over: why this incident has made me feel awful. You see, I can personally vouch for the truth of the statement that James Watson had a history of making disparaging remarks about women and minorities, because I was present on three occasions when he did. I was present, I heard him say those things, and I kept silent. As did everyone else.

How could someone of James Watson's stature have made so many hurtful remarks for so long and not been called to account sooner? Thinking back on the times I sat there and said nothing, I have to believe it's in large part because we enabled his behavior. Why? Certainly not because we agreed with it. A large part, I think, was not knowing exactly how to respond. I come from a generation raised to avoid public commotion, to be polite in the face of poor manners, and not to drag the discussion down to the lowest level. That can make for civilized discourse, but it also makes for paralysis in such situations. Having neither the training nor the experience in handling this kind of confrontation the right way, the default is silence. And, as any law student will tell you, *qui tacit consentire videtur* (he who keeps silent is assumed to consent).

Part of it also was respect, misapplied. There have been few iconic figures in science and even fewer in biology, but Watson certainly is one. He's probably one of the greatest biologists of all time - he's told us so himself. Who am I to challenge him, berate him, make an enemy of him?

But I have to be honest, though I was afraid of saying anything, it wasn't Watson I was afraid of. It was everybody else. I have strong feelings about many things, and I know that expressing those feelings about issues of morality and ethics, right and wrong, lays me open to the charge of being self-righteous. If I didn't know that before, the nearly eight years I've been writing this column have taught me. It's the most common complaint I receive, and the most wounding. Because it wounds, it also can inhibit. The fear is not just that someone will say you're being preachy, acting like you think you're better than they are; the fear is that they may be right. It's an insidious charge, because it attacks the style without addressing the substance of what's been said. It redirects a critical discussion into an *hominem* attack on the critic.

Yet, I remain convinced that it's the life without principles, not the unexamined life, that is really not worth living. Put simply, I think you have to stand for something. The question is how to do it. Interestingly, we scientists don't have a problem when the issue is a scientific one.

What if, instead of making a remark that carried with it all the enormous baggage of race, class, prejudice and intolerance, Watson had said "apes evolved from man"? Is there a biologist worthy of the name who wouldn't have stood up and demanded, politely but firmly, to see the data on which such an outlandish statement was based? And wouldn't the absence of any such data, and the presentation of data that clearly indicated the opposite, expose the idea for the nonsense it was? Why couldn't I have done the same thing? The fact that the issue was morally charged might have been difficult - I am flawed and might feel that I have no moral platform from which to preach to others. But that should not have prevented me from acting as a scientist. Science is about evidence, and now, thanks in large part to the field of molecular biology and genomics, which James Watson, ironically, largely co-founded, we have the data to refute the claims that one race is superior and another inferior or that gender is linked to intellectual fitness. If someone says something different, we can challenge them to produce the evidence that supports their assertions, and we can cite the facts that prove them false. If we don't know those facts well, then I think we owe it both to ourselves and to our fellow humans to learn them.

Our status as genome biologists gives us both ammunition and a powerful line of attack when we are confronted with ignorance, prejudice, and bigotry. It gives us a way of calling such attitudes to account and exposing them for the fallacies they are without necessarily falling into the trap of self-righteousness, real or apparent. That's what I should have done the first time I heard James Watson make a remark of the kind that got him fired, and that's what I hope I will have the presence of mind to do the next time someone else says something similar.

Look, I am well aware that most of the trouble I've gotten into in my life - and believe me, I've gotten into my share - has either been caused or compounded by my inability to keep my big mouth shut. But the Watson case is humbling because it's reminded me of all the times that I should have kept it open.

I hope I'll find a way to do it without seeming to be holier-than-thou. I hope I won't come across like a pompous, moralistic ass. I hope somehow I can make it clear that I know full well that dark thoughts and wrong notions are no stranger to me, that my feeling that I should speak up stems not from the sense that I'm better than anyone else but from wanting not to be worse than I am. And that it's being a scientist, not a saint, that gives me the right to challenge an idea, because I am trained to do so on the basis of the facts behind it.

But most of all, I hope that I won't let the fear of being called self-righteous or taken for a pompous jerk cause me to be silent again. If I come across that way and make a fool of myself, it'll hurt. I don't like any part of the idea of embarrassing either myself, or those who might be with me. But if the outcome turns out to be that I feel embarrassed, I guess I can live with it. Because I think it would still be better than the way I feel right now, which is - ashamed.