Nick Cozzarelli

IT IS A SAD MOMENT WHEN ONE NOTES THE PASSING OF A VALUED AND RESPECTED FELLOW EDITOR. Nick Cozzarelli served the U.S. National Academies for more than a decade as editor in chief of Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences (PNAS). During that time, he turned the journal around, and no one should think it was an easy task. When Nick came aboard in 1995, members of the Academy (it wasn’t pluralized yet) were fond of their ability to sponsor papers for colleagues or to get their own published, and some objected to the institution of more formal and rigorous peer review. The current multiple-track process conserves some initiative for members but puts all prospective authors on a more even footing. As a result, PNAS has broadened its appeal to more fields of science and increased its publication volume so much that it now accumulates in forklift lots at academic offices. PNAS is as lively as it is big, and it’s one of the places where we at Science regularly look to find papers we admire and somehow missed.

Nick came to his editorial job during a distinguished scientific career in the Department of Molecular and Cell Biology at the University of California, Berkeley. He managed to combine those commitments in a way that was continuously productive on both fronts, a source of admiration for those of us who try these things only one at a time. He did distinguished work on a complex set of reactions involving enzymes that can unwind DNA helices, others that perform re-isomerization, and still others that are responsible for condensation. Cozzarelli more recently had been using DNA microarrays to examine the role of these enzymes in folding, replication, and transcription in bacterial chromosomes.

He had strong views about science, about publishing, and about life. He was among the passionate advocates for open access to scientific publications and engaged the support of the National Academies and his publications committee to make PNAS available in that way. In the course of this debate, he was a strong and occasionally astringent advocate, as he was in the discussions about changing the rules for submitting papers to PNAS. In both instances, the position he supported gained strength from his consistency and energy. Principled stands supported by passionate commitment can ruffle feathers, and Nick sometimes did. But his combination of candor and good humor made him so likeable and forgivable that he left little scorched earth.

For the work he did for PNAS, Nick deserves and will get the thanks of the scientific community. But he understood that scientific publication depends on a host of volunteer laborers who really make it work. There are those who work as editors for society journals and there are editorial boards, most of which serve without compensation. Some journals go to outside committees for quick reactions about whether a paper should receive in-depth peer review. Finally, there are the peer reviewers themselves: the referees who perform close analysis on each paper. In this remarkable system, authors put themselves willingly into the hands of peers, and the reviewers treat their responsibilities with painstaking seriousness. One might expect angry cries of “foul” or “theft” in this competitive universe, but disagreements over fairness are actually remarkable for their scarcity.

There are many activities to which smart people devote themselves generously without getting paid for it. This may be a human need that requires fulfillment by some commitment or other. (There are those persistent volunteer reviewers for the books on Amazon.com). But there is something different and special about those who make themselves available for challenging work just to sustain what is inherently a competitive activity. Not only are the reviewers unpaid; no resume listing “best peer review of 2006” is likely to be presented to a tenure committee this year. Maybe an extension of the open access idea would solve that problem. Suppose reviews were signed and made public along with the paper? Would the benefits of transparency outweigh the costs to candor? That would not only let readers into the evaluation process, but it would let the efforts of the identified reviewers be recognized and perhaps rewarded professionally. Nick might even have liked this. I wish it weren’t too late to ask.

– Donald Kennedy

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