Tempus Really Fugits

April 24, 2005

Trying to plan my remaining columns, I checked with my editor at the Observer to find out how many more were left to write before turning the Presidential Pen over to my successor. To my surprise, the answer was “just one.”

There’s no doubt about it, tempus really fugits. A year in the life of an APS President goes by in a flash. Of course it’s not quite over yet. Column deadlines being what they are, the final event of my term — the Annual Convention — is still over a month away. But, in “column time,” this is the last chance to look back and reflect.

The Main Event
Committees, columns, conventions — there are a number of predictable activities in any presidential year. And then there are the things that just happen. To a large extent, this past year has been dominated by the changes in funding priorities at NIMH. The Institute’s commitment to research that is directly connected to mental health and illness was reaffirmed and strengthened. In the zero sum game of funding, the priority afforded to supporting the most basic of psychological science — basic research that was not yet ready for application and translation — was lowered.

The events that transpired have been well chronicled in the Observer and in the scientific and general press. There has been a tremendous mobilization of resources across the profession working toward insuring that the most basic of basic research has a supportive home at NIH. At this writing, these efforts continue. It is clear that they are having an impact, but it is not clear what the ultimate outcome will be.

My biggest fear is that young scientists, who are arguably the least grant-savvy and have the fewest resources to fall back on in hard times, will bear the brunt of a significant cutback in support for basic psychological science. This would be a huge loss for the profession and ultimately for NIMH’s goals of ameliorating mental illness. History tells us that many of the best new ideas for dealing with seemingly intractable problems will come from young minds taking fresh new looks at these problems.

Pay Attention to that Man (and Woman) Behind the Curtain
Throughout the year, I have had the privilege of working closely with and getting to know the APS staff. One of the most enjoyable days of my presidential year was a Friday spent in the APS office in Washington meeting with the staff and getting a better sense of how things run. Talk about your “all muscle, no fat” organization: APS is extremely well-served by an impressive group of talented, energetic, smart, and committed people. It’s really quite astonishing to see the amount of work that goes on behind the curtains in producing every aspect of APS’s work. Bravo!

Not-So-Solemn Columns
Then there was the monthly column. At the outset, I was told that I could lighten the load by inviting “guest columnists,” but I decided to try to write the entire series myself. After all, my sister has been
writing a daily financial column for 10 years — I should at least be able to write one per month. So one sibling-rivalry-fueled decision made, the big (and panic-laden) question loomed: What on earth do I write about? Some months, events conspired to provide a topic. Other months, I tried my hand at humor. But mostly I shared observations about spending a career in psychological science.

Each month 1,200 words were printed on Page 5 without a great deal of reader feedback. Occasionally there would be an e-mailed comment, a letter to the Forum, someone mentioning a column they liked (or didn’t like). Nonetheless, over the year, I found myself warming to the monthly task. I still fretted about whether some things were too dry, some too personal, and some too flip. But, amazingly to me, when I got to this last column of the year, there were still a lot of things in my column idea bin that I had not gotten to.

There were two columns that I really wish I had gotten to. The inspiration for the first was an eye-opening Sunday morning spent accompanying a psychiatrist friend on medication rounds in San Francisco’s Tenderloin district. I wanted to write something weaving together the current plight of the homeless mentally ill, the idealism of the Community Mental Health Centers Act of 1963, and the evils (and virtues) of institutionalization for the mentally ill. The inspiration for the second was the surreal experience of listening to a series of job talks for a faculty position in judgment and decision-making. As each candidate regaled the audience with a litany of errors that humans make when judging and deciding, a column started germinating on the many ways that we ignore psychological science in the conduct of our professional lives. Ah, those lovable, whacky psychologists…

Quo Vadis?
Looking ahead to the end of this year at the helm, there are many challenges and opportunities on the horizon for psychological science. One sure thing is that APS will continue to assume a leadership role in seeking solutions, planning for the future, and increasing the impact of psychological science. APS is well-served by its superb management team and staff and by the efforts of all those who give generously of their time and talents to serve on the Board of Directors, Editorial Boards, Student Caucus, and various committees and task forces. It has been a tremendous honor and privilege working with this remarkable group of people and having so many rewarding interactions with APS members. I am really look forward to seeing as many of you as possible at the convention in Los Angeles and to continuing to be part of APS in the future.