

Introduction

Nobel Prize winners do not come in a standard form. As Master of Clare College, it has been my privilege and a pleasure to get to know two great, but very different, American Nobel Prize winners, honorary fellows of the College. Norman Ramsey came to Clare in the 1930s from Columbia University with little knowledge of physics and worked in the Cavendish with Rutherford. He went back to the United States, to Los Alamos where he liaised with the Air Force on the size of plane needed to drop the atomic bomb. After the war as chair of the Harvard Physics Department he defended younger colleagues against charges of communist sympathies, including a memorable 1953 appearance on *Meet the Press*, which resulted in a dinner with a grudgingly admiring Joe McCarthy himself. Ramsey won the 1989 Nobel Prize in Physics for his work on the atomic clock. He was a progressive—brilliant, courageous, and understated. He did not shirk publicity nor did he seek it out. He was not a household name.

James Dewey Watson, Jr. likewise is a progressive—brilliant and courageous—but bubbles over publicly with new ideas. As I discovered, he can be recognized, out of the blue, by an Italian TV crew in a restaurant on 53rd Street in New York City. He has been an extraordinarily generous benefactor of Clare College, where he was a member when he did the postdoctoral research that led to the discovery of the structure of DNA, celebrated by a sculpture in the grounds of Memorial Court, Clare, and by a plaque outside the Eagle Public House. This memoir of his father, James Dewey Watson, Sr., is crucial to understanding the form of scientist that Jim Watson, Jr. has become.

This affectionate account is, at one level, a lyrical memoir of a father, Jim, Sr., and son, Jim, Jr. —throwing baseballs in the yard, going bird-watching together, traveling the world, living close by in Cambridge, Massachusetts, in his father’s widowed later years.

At another level, the story is a chronicle of an archetypal American family from before the Civil War to Vietnam. Here are ambitious settlers making it in the Midwest; successful entrepreneurs who are sometimes victims of financial panics, rescued from financial ruin more than once by strong women; Roosevelt Democrats whose party affiliation was determined by the Depression, which left them for over 15 years without a car; beneficiaries of the war because Jim’s mother went on to be a personnel manager for the Chicago Red Cross after being a 7th Ward precinct captain in Chicago Mayor Edward Kelly’s Democratic machine; prewar, very modest bungalow homeowners who could just afford after WWII to move to the Indiana Dunes on Lake Michigan.

In this typical American chronicle, famous, if not infamous, names keep appearing. The Watson Saloon, actually a high-class confectioners, in Springfield, Illinois, was where Lincoln and his supporters spent election night in 1860 and where they held the party when he set out for Washington with an American flag sewn by Jim’s great, great, great aunt Abigail Watson Ives. Jim’s great uncle Dudley Crafts Watson at the Chicago Art Institute mentored and guided his young cousin Orson Welles. Jim’s uncle Bill Watson was a Yale professor who worked on the Manhattan Project. Future president of the University of Chicago, Robert Maynard Hutchins, was friend and classmate of Jim’s father at Oberlin College. Above all, the precocious, young bird-watching companion of Jim’s father in the early 1920s was Nathan Leopold, perpetrator with Richard Loeb of the appalling May 1924 abduction and murder of Bobby Franks that captured the American imagination.

The up and down story of Jim Watson, Sr. also tells a lot about the future Nobel Prize winner. Jim, Sr. had to leave college after a year and

spent his life as an accounts manager at LaSalle Extension University. At all times he was a voracious reader and second-hand book collector, much pleased when George Steiner persuaded him to give his collection of novels by John Cowper Powys to Churchill College. He wrote in his diary in 1939, “To me an interesting person is one alive with intellectual curiosity.” Intellectual curiosity is something that still consumes Jim, Jr. as his work on cancer testifies.

Jim, Sr. was also impatient with boring people. “There is a kind of optimist who maintains that one should never be bored, that it indicates a defect on the part of the bored person. One ought, the optimist says cheerily, to find interest in anything and everything. This is nonsense. People ought to get bored much quicker than they do, and insist on having something interesting. I would say that the civilized man is distinguished by his capacity for being bored and finding a remedy for it in thought and action.” It is perhaps not surprising that his son would write *Avoid Boring People*.

When Jim, Jr. was writing *The Double Helix*, his father counseled him, “In regard to the new book, remember what I said about calling any living person stupid etc. You will find it can’t be done.” I’ll leave others to decide whether Jim heeded that caution.

Jim, Sr. thought hard about political philosophy. In 1957 he worked hard to crystalize his lifetime thoughts in a paper for a small discussion group:

I would like to talk with you this evening in regard to the philosophy of liberalism. Judging from the criticism directed against this philosophy in recent years, it seems to be defensive. Without exaggeration all of the evils of the present-day world have been placed on its doorstep. And as a result there seems to be a failure of faith in this old traditional philosophy in some quarters.

To those of us who have been liberals for many years it is discouraging to see the ideas with which we have lived discredited. I do not believe that the

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liberal ideas are the cause of our troubles, or that this philosophy has outlived its day. To me there seems to be enough human reason left to which to appeal against reckless fanaticism of every sort.

At a time when American politics is wracked by a seemingly remorseless anti-intellectual fundamentalism, the appeal to reason of Watson, father and son, should be cherished.

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