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President's 2014 Fall Message

"Do not go gentle into that good night." –Dylan Thomas

This message is a clarion call to arms that as members of this Society we must reclaim our rightful place at the hub of the basic life science research enterprise and shed the perception that ours is a specialty area relegated to the periphery, not of "interest" in the context of other adult tissues and processes that are perceived more relevant to human health. I can relate a personal example of such marginalization, regarding a recent submission of a comprehensive conditional knockout study on the function in mouse oocyte development of two *Hdac* genes potentially important for epigenetic modifications. One reviewer did not support publication; the work was well done, but should be submitted to a more specialized journal in reproduction because it would be of interest only to researchers studying mouse oocyte biology. This decision runs totally against the importance of reproduction for normal development (and in fact, the same journal routinely publishes similar conditional knockout studies on the role of *Hdac*'s in development of other tissues!). The title of Theodosius Dobzhansky 1973 essay "Nothing in Biology Makes Sense Except in the Light of Evolution" is spot on, because at the end of the day evolution and human health are rooted in reproduction. In fact, as members of this Society know well, reproduction is at the core of life science research, and everything else is at the periphery!

Now is not the time to discuss how the reproductive sciences arrived at this current state of affairs, but rather focus on what we as a Society can do to right the course. When I decided to run for President of this Society, I wrote paraphrasing Charles Dickens that in the life sciences "it is the best of times and it is the worst of times." It is the best of times because remarkable technical advances (e.g., the -omics (genomics, transcriptomics, proteomics, metabolomics) and live cell imaging to name a few) have enabled scientists not only to uncover answers to long-standing questions but also have generated new and exciting questions. And it is the worst of times because the global financial crisis has led to a protracted and substantial reduction of government support for the life sciences in many countries. The reproductive sciences have contributed enormously to these scientific advances, but have not escaped the maelstrom of the global financial meltdown. As a Society we are at an inflection point in which we will emerge as either a stronger or weaker community of scientists. We cannot control the externalities that impact our Society, but we can identify ways that will sustain us through these challenging times and emerge stronger." I wrote those words in January 2012 and they remain true today. The most acute problem confronting our Society is the disconcerting and continuing decrease in membership, a decline that has higher order ripple effects, e.g., fewer scientists studying the reproductive sciences means fewer publications in the reproductive sciences, which leads to decreased visibility in the research community. The first order of business is to retain our members, but doing so is only part of the solution. The sustainable long-term solution is to attract scientist's who don't think of themselves as reproductive biologists but whose research actually aligns quite well with the reproductive sciences. So what can we as a Society do to retain current members and attract new members?

The Annual Meeting serves many functions, but a central function is to provide a forum for its members to re-connect and become energized, revitalized, rejuvenated, and excited to initiate new experiments as a result of annual meeting presentations and conversations with colleagues. Because the meeting serves as an important opportunity to attract new members, the program must have broad appeal that not only meets the needs of our membership but also piques the interest of scientists who do not view themselves as reproductive biologists. The theme of the 2015 annual meeting (to be held in San Juan, Puerto Rico), "Evolution of Sex," is deliberately designed to appeal not only to our membership but well beyond. And recognizing that many people can only attend a one or perhaps two meetings a year due to the current funding climate,

the meeting's format has evolved to a meeting-within-a-meeting, with morning sessions that should be of interest to every attendee and afternoon Focus Sessions that will appeal to the specialist. Further contributing to the annual meeting, the financial strength of the SSR has substantially improved under the watchful stewardship of our previous and current Treasurers (Bruce Murphy, Marty Matzuk, and Sally Perreault Darney) and clearly helped by the economic upturn. This improved financial position has enabled the Society's senior leadership to be remarkably creative and flexible in crafting new ways to deploy our endowment and unrestricted funds to support the Annual Meeting, and thus the Program Co-Chairs, John Eppig and Sarah Kimmins, and I have pulled out all stops for the 2015 Annual Meeting, and have invited the best scientists in the world to speak. With this exciting program, it is important that every member of SSR attends the 2015 meeting. There is no excuse for not attending! The Program will be fantastic, and San Juan is an attractive and readily accessible and affordable destination point. But equally important is that each of you reaches out to your colleagues who are not SSR members—be they graduate students, post-docs, faculty, whatever—talking up the program and encouraging them to attend. Our program is singularly exciting and provocative and if you believe in our Society as I do, it is easy “selling something in which you believe.” The Annual Meeting presents an enormous opportunity to attract new members.

Publication is the main venue by which we communicate the exciting work that is going on in the reproductive sciences, informing the scientific community that we work on questions of interest that go far beyond reproduction. Nevertheless, the reproductive sciences are often viewed as a specialty area, replete with its own “boutique” journals, and “boutique” is often equated with low impact factor. Yes, those dreaded two words: impact factor (IF). Regardless of how we individually may feel about IF's, they are here to stay for the foreseeable future, because they are deeply embedded in the culture of academia, from appointment and promotion of faculty to department resource allocation within universities. Who among us can look in the mirror and say that we are immune to the seductive lure of high impact journals? Therein is the problem! Every month ~60 papers are published in relatively high-impact journals that fall within the scope of the reproductive sciences, broadly defined. But because these papers are published in a variety of journals, their effect in elevating perception of the importance of the reproductive sciences is diluted. Interestingly, authors of these publications are often not members of SSR (or any other reproductive biology society), but are scientists whose work has drawn them into the world of reproductive biology. For example, a gene is deleted because of its potential role in a developmental process, e.g., heart development, and surprisingly, the mutants are phenotypically normal but infertile! Such situations provide an opportunity to attract and retain scientists (and their students) into our field and Society. SSR's senior leadership is thinking creatively how to consolidate and showcase high-impact research in the reproductive sciences not only for the health of our Society but also for the well-being of our field. As President, I welcome your input on how to achieve this goal, so important for our future.

But our future really lies with all of us engaging colleagues at our institutions who are not “card-carrying” reproductive biologists, but whose scientific investigations are linked, directly or indirectly, to the reproductive sciences. We can all find venues to engage with these individuals: a monthly meeting of faculty and students who share a common research interest, conversations and discussions that promote reproductive systems as models for a plethora of biological questions, be they gene expression, cell cycle, cell-cell interaction, whatever. New collaborations are likely to emerge and provide opportunities to recruit new people into the field. Scientists are often comfortable wearing more than one hat. Each of us should make it our goal that in the next 3–5 years, one of our colleagues feels comfortable wearing a reproduction hat!

I firmly believe that if we all commit to pursue this call to arms we will emerge stronger as a Society and as a field. Such changes will not happen overnight and there will be much headwind, but it is a journey well worth taking. So, “[d]o not go gentle into that good night”! And feel free to contact me if you have insights how we can recapture our rightful place at the epicenter of life science research.

Richard