

An occasional column, in which Mole, Caveman and other troglodytes involved in cell science emerge to share their views on various aspects of life-science research. Messages for Caveman and other contributors can be left at mole@biologists.com.

Any correspondence may be published in forthcoming issues.



The Giraffe

It's a lovely, warm day, a lazy sort of day – a day for remembering. The azaleas are in bloom and there are birds chirping in the trees, and I'm not going to review any grants today. I'll do that tomorrow, when it's raining, and I'm not in such a good mood.

I've been remembering a story I heard a long time ago from my great friend Professor Ferret. Oh yes, Ferret and I are great friends, even though he is much better-looking than I am; I was even best man at one of his weddings. The story goes like this.

Once upon a time there was a beautiful meadow at the edge of a dark forest, and the people who lived there spent their days in the study of the world around them. They didn't go into the forest, because it was dark, but preferred the meadow, where the sun shone, and they measured the stones with their measuring sticks and argued happily about their stone measurements. One

day, a scientist among them who had little interest in stones told them that he had glimpsed an animal in the forest, and he described its long neck and thick hooves, its large spots and blue tongue. "Come see it with me", he exhorted, but they laughed at him for not being a real scientist.

"I'll prove it", he said. So he went into the dark forest and found his animal, but try as he might, he could not move it. He pulled its long legs and its long neck, to no avail. But when he pulled the tail, the animal chose that moment to perform a perfectly natural bodily function, upon the scientist. The scientist, delighted, ran back to the meadow, covered in his indelicate evidence, but the others sneered at him and closed their ranks.

He resolutely returned to the dark forest and tried again. He found the animal, he pulled and pushed, and finally he threw a stone at it. The animal became enraged, and chased him. They ran through the forest, and eventually broke

into the meadow. And when the other scientists saw the beast, they realized that their colleague was right.

And now, whenever we return to the meadow, we can see the scientists happily spending their days measuring the hoof prints with their measuring sticks. The end.

I love Professor Ferret's story, but it makes me wonder what sort of scientist I am or want to be. I hope I'm not a stone or hoof-print measurer, but I also know that I'm not a lone explorer who faces ridicule until the day comes, if it comes, when others realize I may be right. Because I might not be. This isn't cowardice, I hope, it is experience. I've seen too many lone explorers become bitter and disillusioned when nobody much cares about their personal quests for what they are so sure is true. I like

working within a paradigm, gently looking for little things that can produce little changes, and sometimes the changes are not so little.

The way I see it, any biological system can be a window into the deeper mysteries if we only follow them where they lead. Yes, there are many amazing beasts that lurk just out of sight, and I reckon that I get a glimpse of one now and then. And when I do, I look a little harder in the directions they might lead. But I think it is perfectly okay to do this carefully, perhaps ploddingly, so that the work will come to the attention of my colleagues without taking a huge risk at every turn. Because Professor Ferret's story might have a different ending – like this.

The scientist ran from the forest and into the meadow, the beast at his heels.

“Look! Look!”, he cried, and the others looked. And one aged worker spoke up from his perch beside the unique meteorite from which he was taking careful measurements. “It’s just a giraffe”, he said, and went back to work.

Maybe I will have a look at that stack of grants after all. Most of them, perhaps all of them, will describe little jaunts into the meadow, with new ways to measure the stones and perhaps some new ideas about one or two interesting ones. And maybe one will seek to search for strange new creatures in the neighboring forest. I wonder which ones will fare best? I wonder which ones should?

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Cell Science at a Glance

Cell Science at a Glance is included as a poster in the paper copy of the journal and available in several formats in the online version, which we encourage readers to download and use as slides. Contributions to this section cover signalling pathways, phylogenetic trees, multiprotein complexes, useful reagents... and much more. The following are just some of the articles appearing in this section of JCS over the coming months.

Rab GTPases *Angela Wandingerness*

ER-Golgi transport *Rainer Pepperkok*

Myosins *Margaret A. Titus*

Talin *David Critchley*

Dictyostelium development *Cornelius J. Weijer*

Amyloid precursor protein (APP) *Michael Wolfe*

Desmosomes *Kathleen J. Green*

We also encourage readers to submit ideas for future contributions to this section. These should be emailed to the Executive Editor at jcs@biologists.com