

2015 Association of American Physicians George M. Kober Medal All the Good People

Francis S. Collins

J Clin Invest. 2015;125(9):3328-3329. <https://doi.org/10.1172/JCI84081>.

AAP Kober Medal Acceptance

Wow, that was pretty unbelievable! David, I can't tell you how grateful I am to you for the time and effort that went into your presentation — and also for leaving out some of the things I was afraid you were going to bring up. For instance, you didn't mention the weekday morning 25 years ago that we played racquetball and forgot that we were both supposed to be giving a major presentation at the University of Michigan Medical Center. We got a voice message from Bill Kelley's secretary saying, "Where the hell are you?" As we were both sweaty and about to jump into the shower, we decided just to pretend we hadn't received the message. David, we have shared many things since we both landed in that vibrant Department of Medicine at the University of Michigan. To be close friends over all these years, and to have our families become friends with each other too, has just been a very rich and marvelous life experience. So, thank you for being willing to take on the job of introducing this Kober Medal moment. And to your coconspirator, my wife Diane, thank you for sharing just enough, but not too much. How can one adequately say thank you for things that are so completely over the top, so unexpected? When [...]

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How can one adequately say thank you for things that are so completely over the top, so unexpected? When I look at the list of those who have received this medal over the decades, I can't imagine a more distinguished group of leaders of academic medicine. So it's very hard to say that I deserve to be on that list at all. But I'll paraphrase Jack Benny, who, when he received some sort of award, said, "Well, I don't really deserve this award, but I have arthritis, and I didn't deserve that either."

I have plantar fasciitis, and I didn't deserve that.

But kidding aside, it is a joy to be here with all of you, looking out at this amazing gathering of people who have meant so much to me over these decades. And it is a special joy to see the next generation of medical leaders here. I had a chance to meet with many of them yesterday in the APSA session. I was deeply inspired by the energy, creativity, and optimism. Given this critical mass of talent, I am fully confident that American biomedical research is on a terrific path forward.

I want to thank the AAP for putting on this meeting each year with ASCI and for organizing the Kober Medal process. Six years ago I was actually about to become the president of the AAP. But then I was asked by Obama to become NIH director, and the White House said I couldn't do both. I'm forever grateful to the AAP council for accommodating that unexpected change in the succession plan. Frankly, I'm also glad that I didn't have to go to all the trouble of organizing one of these national meetings, because it's a lot of work. But thank you to those who did, so we could all enjoy it.

Thinking about the history of the AAP, one of the founders was none other than Sir William Osler. No occasion of this sort is complete without some reference to Osler. My favorite sentence in which he described what we are all about is this: "To wrest from nature the secrets which have perplexed philosophers in all ages, to trace to their sources the causes of disease, to correlate the vast stores of knowledge that they may be quickly available for the prevention and cure of disease, these are our ambitions." Doesn't that say it?

I am particularly grateful that this occasion has provided a chance for my family to be here. That includes my daughter Margaret, who's a nephrologist in Wilmington, North Carolina, and my daughter Elizabeth, a social worker in Tecumseh, Michigan. Both of these ded-

icated working moms have left their children behind to come and join in a memorable weekend. But I especially want to recognize my awesome wife, Diane, my soulmate and life partner. She is my right arm in everything. Her presence has made NIH not just an amazing institution, but also a family place. Through her participation in innumerable NIH events and her service on the boards of the Children's Inn and the Friends of Patients at NIH, she has set the tone for NIH in a warm and generous way. NIH feels much more hospitable now, even though federal rules say that we can't serve you even anything except water on campus. (If you come to our house, I'll make you a martini, and Diane will fix you some amazing hors d'oeuvres.)

David also mentioned my inclination to ask not only questions about nature (which is what science does), but also to ask questions that reach outside of the materialistic worldview — the "why" questions as well as the "how." In my experience, those can be a source of reflection, inspiration, and wisdom too. I'm often sitting at my home desk at 4:30 am, bleary eyed, trying to figure out the plan for the day. Next to me there is a printed copy of a brief Franciscan prayer that provides some excellent guidance — at 4:30 am or any other time. It goes like this:

"May God bless you with discomfort at easy answers, half truths, and superficial relationships, so that you may live deep within your heart. May God bless you with tears to shed, for those who suffer from pain, rejection, starvation, and war, so that you may reach out your hand to comfort them, and turn their pain into joy. May God bless you with enough foolishness to believe that you can make a difference in this world, so that you can do what others claim cannot be done."

I love the notion of being blessed with foolishness.

On that note, before we all go off to receptions and dinner, I think we need a little bit more foolishness here. And I'm just the foolish guy to provide it.

Conflict of interest: The author has declared that no conflict of interest exists.

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[Dr. Collins picks up a guitar.]

I've been thinking about what kind of music this occasion deserves. No, I'm not going to sing "My Way." You heard enough about that from David, and those poor medical students had to live through it. Instead, I thought this evening ought to feature a song that recognizes the community that we are all part of and the people that we are all grateful to. It will give me one more chance to say thanks. And please note, this is a group event. There is a chorus in this song. You can't say it's too hard to learn, because it's not.

This is actually a rewrite of a song by Ken Hicks that's often sung at the end of a folk festival, when everybody's feeling all mellow and they get all the performers up on stage. Someone says, "OK, let's sing one more song," and the voices in harmony raise up "All the Good People." Well, we're going to sing about all the good people too, but with different verses.

So I'll sing the chorus and then I'll get into the verses, but when the chorus comes around, I hope you'll jump in too.

[Dr. Collins begins to play.]

All the Good People

Chorus: *This is a song for all the good people,
All the good people who are part of this family.
This is a song for all the good people.
We're joined together by this common thread.*

This is a song for all of my mentors.
You've been at the center; you've taught me a ton.
For Kirkman, Parker, Weissman, and Kelley,
You've helped me do lots more than I might have done.

This is a song for my awesome family,
For Diane who brings joy wherever she goes.
I know I've been busy, dear Margaret and Lizzi,
But you've blessed my life, and it's your love that shows.

This is a song for all of my patients
Who came to me hoping some help could be found,
Assumed good intentions of my interventions.
It's being your partner that makes this profound.

This is a song for all us researchers
Who study the causes, whose dreams are quite real,
When all of this learning and all this discerning
Can answer the yearning and help us to heal.

This song's almost over, as I thank you for Kober,
A day to remember, a feeling so strong,
My cred has been sav-ed by my best friend David,
So just one more time now, let's lift up this song!

(And yes, they all sang.)