THE GLITTERING PRIZES

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It is the time of year when many learned societies are seeking nominations for medals and other awards which confer honour on those colleagues of exceptional achievement. Having been a member of several awards committees, it has become apparent to me that few of us take the trouble to nominate even the most deserving of colleagues for awards. In fact, awards committees are usually so short of nominations that the Chair has to cajole and browbeat friends and colleagues into submitting nominations for scientists who are clearly of the right level of distinction.

I have been wondering why this is so and have arrived at four possible explanations. First, the “tall poppy syndrome”. This term (Australian I believe) relates to the tendency of people of merit to be cut down, resented or criticised because they are more distinguished than their peers. The phenomenon is widespread and can be difficult to negotiate. Many people don’t want to nominate a “tall poppy” because of the feeling that the nominee has already had enough success or that this success is out of proportion to the nominee’s ability. The Japanese have a similar expression to “tall poppy syndrome” that refers to hammering-down nails which stand out. Second, there already exists a system of tenure and promotion which relies on seniority or patronage rather than external recognition. Seniority and patronage play a role almost everywhere, but where they dominate there is no need to seek “extra” external recognition. Third, nominations for international awards must normally be written in English. This can be inhibiting and time-consuming for non-native speakers and so could be a potentially powerful disincentive. Fourth, there may be a feeling that awards are pre-arranged by the committee and that it is pointless to make an unsolicited nomination. I don’t know if this is a widespread feeling, but it certainly isn’t correct for any committee I have been involved with.

Let us consider for a moment a country (USA) whose academic system is well represented in the published material. The appearance of advertising in this magazine does not constitute endorsement or approval of the quality or value of the products or of claims made for them.

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Bernard Wood

from a list of awardees for any international prize. The connection was the reason why my title, “The Glittering Prizes”, was taken from a work by novelist Frederic Raphael, who was born in the US and educated in the UK. But excellence flourishes everywhere, and it has to be nurtured and recognised if science is to remain outward-looking and international.

The stated role of awards is to recognise the excellence of the individual’s work and nowhere in the world would a major international award not confer distinction on the recipient. I have heard it said, however, that there are “too many awards”. And it is true that the number has increased substantially during my career. But, as renowned French geochemist Claude Allègre once explained to me, the existence of international awards in Earth Sciences is not only extremely important for the individual but also extremely important for our field because our science often stands in competition with other sciences for positions and funding. If we want our field to be taken seriously by physicists and chemists, we need to have serious international awards and give them to distinguished scientists. Awards are for the promotion of our fields of research as well as for the promotion of the individual. That’s why we need to recognise excellence and distinction.

Assuming that I have now convinced you of the necessity of writing letters of nomination, I want to share some thoughts on writing a strong letter.

1) The letter must be unreservedly positive about the merits of the candidate. Many colleagues find it difficult to write in a completely positive way. This is due to the “tall poppy syndrome”. But positivity is absolutely essential. If you can’t say that the candidate is “outstanding”, “ground breaking”, “paradigm-shifting” and whose contributions are “seminal”, then don’t write.

2) You must read the candidate’s most important papers again and summarise their findings for the committee. I have been involved with a committee I have been involved with.

3) The quality of the English is unimportant so long as the letter is honest and heartfelt. We English say that the Irish write our language best, so long as the letter is honest and heartfelt. We English say that the Irish write our language best, but this ability does not translate into disproportionately large numbers of awards.

So, please, colleagues—start writing!

Bernard Wood
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