Banquet Speech

Barbara McClintock’s speech at the Nobel Banquet, December 10, 1983

Your Majesties, Your Royal Highnesses, Ladies and Gentlemen

I am delighted to be here, and charmed by the warmth of the Swedish people. And I wish to thank them for their many courtesies.

I understand I am here this evening because the maize plant, with which I have worked for many years, revealed a genetic phenomenon that was totally at odds with the dogma of the times, the mid-nineteen forties. Recently, with the general acceptance of this phenomenon, I have been asked, notably by young investigators, just how I felt during the long period when my work was ignored, dismissed, or aroused frustration. At first, I must admit, I was surprised and then puzzled, as I thought the evidence and the logic sustaining my interpretation of it, were sufficiently revealing. It soon became clear, however, that tacit assumptions - the substance of dogma - served as a barrier to effective communication. My understanding of the phenomenon responsible for rapid changes in gene action, including variegated expressions commonly seen in both plants and animals, was much too radical for the time. A person would need to have my experiences, or ones similar to them, to penetrate this barrier. Subsequently, several maize geneticists did recognize and explore the nature of this phenomenon, and they must have felt the same exclusions. New techniques made it possible to realize that the phenomenon was universal, but this was many years later. In the interim I was not invited to give lectures or seminars, except on rare occasions, or to serve on committees or panels, or to perform other scientists’ duties. Instead of causing personal difficulties, this long interval proved to be a delight. It allowed complete freedom to continue investigations without interruption, and for the pure joy they provided.