

OBITUARY

Francis Crick (1916–2004)

The death of Francis Crick deprives us of one of the greatest scientists of the 20th century, whose creativity and power of mind dominated molecular biology in its golden years. Many people have told the story of his achievements; here I would simply like to recollect some of the qualities of this remarkable man.

The first impression one had of Francis was of brilliance. He was dazzlingly quick in his thought processes, and his blue eyes seemed to light up as the solution to a problem sprang into his mind. Alongside this speed went clarity: the blurs and confusions in most minds simply did not exist for him. When somebody gave a lecture, Francis was ready at the end (and often in the middle) to give them a lucid and exact account of what their work meant, for better or for worse. This made the Laboratory of Molecular Biology's end-of-year lectures a terrifying ordeal for many, but increased their intellectual value, and also made them into excellent spectator sport.

Another quality he had seems almost the opposite of this quicksilver clarity: he had an inexhaustible tenacity that kept him worrying at a problem for long stretches of time. And 'worry' is the word, for there was a kind of nagging unease that kept him forever searching and coming back to what might have been considered established ground. This persistence was never inward-turned; he was always open and communicative and always eager to talk and to listen to others; indeed, he was superbly gifted as a listener and elicitor of information and conversation formed a large part of his daily scientific life.

Conversations were going on apace when I visited him at the Salk Institute in the early 1980s, but now the topic was the brain. He wanted to know everything about visual processing in higher vertebrates: anatomy, physiology and perception, down to the smallest experimental detail. It was fascinating to see how skilfully he drew out the neuroscientists who came to talk to him and how he searched ceaselessly for guiding principles.

The most striking thing was that this was truly a search. Many people with a theoretical bent try to impose their ideas on the world, the type of mind disposed towards abstract



Francis Crick in Hyderabad, India. On the left is P.M. Bhargava.

reasoning being the type of mind most easily seduced by it. It was quite otherwise with Francis: he had great powers of abstract reasoning, but he had an even greater respect for truth, and he was always looking for clues as to what might really be going on. This combination of abilities is far rarer than an optimist might suppose.

Francis's visitors at the Salk could expect to be worked pretty hard, but they could also expect to enjoy themselves. Francis was fun to be with. No one who knew him will forget his wonderful vitality, how he would leap up and run to the board to make some point — 'You see, it's got to be like this!' — or how he would be delighted by some remark and the famous laugh would ring out. But there might also be spells of obsessive concentration so that by the end of an afternoon a visitor's intellectual and nervous resources might be at a low ebb. They would then be glad of the moment when his secretary, Betty Lang, entered discreetly with cups of a curious pungent, steaming drink, an experimental form of herbal tea. Under its influence, one would gradually become conscious of the panorama of the Pacific that his window commanded, and of the hang gliders making their beat along the clifftops. This grand natural scene was a sort of physical correlate of Francis's intellectual world: wide-ranging, brilliantly lit, a little over-aweing, but also immensely inviting and above all an exciting place to be.

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