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# Science

SCIENCE IN MIND

## For Nobel laureates, prize is heady, but life goes on

By Carolyn Y. Johnson | GLOBE STAFF    SEPTEMBER 30, 2013



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**Craig Mello, holding his daughter after a press conference in October 2006 announcing that he shared the Nobel Prize in medicine, said the honor didn't alter his life much.**

As predictions emerge for this year's Nobel prizes, I couldn't help but wonder what it's like for the recipients. Is the buildup to the prize just buzz, or do the potential laureates toss and turn, unable to sleep the night before? How do people balance their real hopes against their desire to not be *that* scientist, the one who waits by the phone for a call from Stockholm that never comes?

For perspective on what getting a Nobel is like, I got in touch with local laureates, who described their experiences by e-mail. Craig Mello, a biologist at the University of Massachusetts Medical School who shared the 2006 medicine prize, got the call while he was up checking his daughter's blood sugar. Jack Szostak, a biologist at Massachusetts General Hospital who shared the 2009 medicine prize, said that he thought the chances of winning were slim, so he didn't do anything special the night before. Frank Wilczek, the MIT scientist who shared the 2004 physics prize, sent an account of the night that he wrote when the memory was fresh:

“Since the early 1980s, I had thought there was a realistic possibility that I'd get the Nobel Prize. Our work was clearly very important for physics, and by then accurate experiments had confirmed it. So each October, around the announcement time, I had a very difficult time sleeping. 2004 was no exception, and I really didn't sleep at all on the night of October 4.

“At 5:12 a.m. I was in the middle of my intended shower, when my wife came in with our telephone in hand. I hadn't heard any ringing, because of [the] noise of the water. She said, ‘There's a woman with a beautiful voice calling from Sweden for you.’ I got out of the stall, naked and dripping wet, to take the call. It was the Nobel Prize.

“Another thing I hadn't anticipated is that the phone call was not just a simple, ‘You've won, congratulations, goodbye.’ Far from it. I didn't count, and it's somewhat of a blur to me now, but I think that about a dozen officials of the Nobel Foundation, the

Swedish Academy of Sciences, and physics friends took up the conversation, one after another.

“It was wonderful. I had never enjoyed being dazed, naked, and wet all at the same time quite so much, and I don’t suppose that I will again.”

The three also answered questions about what comes afterward.

**Szostak:** Things are pretty hectic in between the announcements and the week to 10 days in Sweden. After that, it’s more or less back to normal. I think the good things are the opportunities to encourage young people to be interested in science, or to stay in science if they are already involved; also, helping to raise money to help scientists do really creative work is quite rewarding.

**Wilczek:** It changed a lot! There was a whirlwind of publicity, both for myself and for my work, a great weeklong party in Sweden. And then life continued on a higher plane of self-confidence and self-esteem. Many opportunities opened up. Also, I got back to sleeping well in early October.

**Mello:** It’s a lot of fun, but life doesn’t change too much. You would hope folks in Washington would listen to you, but so far my voice and those of many other scientists who have tried to reach out to Congress seem to go totally unheard.

Finally, on a lighter note relating to your question, I think trash day was Tuesday, and as I was dragging the cans out to the roadside my neighbor from across the street who was doing the same said, “Some things never change.”

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