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The Joy of the Quest

*In life there are no victories or even permanent solutions.
To win is to stay committed and maneuver.*

Henry Grunewald

Anticipation. In research, it adds to the joy of the quest. Each stage of the process provides another opportunity to get it right, even when we've got it wrong. Thinking about solutions leads to the formulation of questions: the way an architect begins with a vision of a building, then tries to find a way to build it.

It is nice when all goes as planned and the experiment works, but what happens when it doesn't? In contrast to the problems confronting an architect who has erred in his design, our experimental building is usually not in danger of collapse. In fact, if the experiment was well planned, something of great value will always be learned, even if it didn't work. Properly collected data, from a well-designed experiment, has a beauty all its own. When Thomas Edison was asked about the large number of failed experiments he had endured in the development of the electric light bulb, he replied, "I did not fail 99 times, I discovered 99 ways that will not work."

While nature may not yield her secrets easily, she does yield them to the persistent, critical observer. Often, the failed experiment is the key. We may not learn what we set out to learn, but serendipity usually leads to something interesting. In this arena, overall intellectual horsepower often takes a backseat to careful reflection on the data, to the pursuit of reasons for the unexpected observation. What did we miss? Where did we go wrong? When viewed from another perspective, does this observation mean...? When in doubt it pays to ask: If I were in Fleming's place, reviewing those culture plates in '29, would I have thrown away the crucial petri dish because it didn't behave as expected?

This is an overall philosophy of problem solving; it is not the relationship of inspiration to perspiration, but of lemons to lemonade.

We don't necessarily get what we want, or even what we deserve. But if things are not going our way, then maybe, in the spirit of Columbus, we need to think about going East to get to the West. Who knows what we will discover?

H. William Strauss
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