Introducing Peter Sterling, the 2012 Recipient of the Proctor Medal

Peter Sterling was born in 1940 in New York, the son of Phillip and Dorothy Sterling, well-known writers and advocates for progressive causes. He was raised and schooled in New York, and attended Cornell University, graduating in 1961. This was at the height of the American civil rights movement, and Peter was involved passionately, protesting and organizing in support of desegregation in the deep South. One of these protests led to his arrest. He paid a fine and was released. Despite this criminal record, he was admitted to medical school.

He attended New York University Medical School for two years, dropping out because he found neuroanatomy more interesting than medical school—interestingly, a path followed a few years earlier by another noted retinal scientist, John Dowling. The choice of neuroanatomy, not always considered a sexy subject, was prescient, as a recent resurgence has made structural neuroscience one of the hot areas in modern neurobiology.

Sterling's PhD work was at Western Reserve University with Hans Kuypers, a hard line, old school neuroanatomist. However, Kuypers also was a technical innovator: He was the first to show that single neurons could be labeled by multiple fluorescent markers. There are echoes of his teacher, Hans Kuypers, a hard line, old school neuroanatomist. Not only his experiments, but his joy and passion for intellectual life. Sometimes combative, visibly thrilled at the celebration and re-enactment of the original civil rights Freedom Rides.

Those who know him learn, sometimes to their discomfort, that Peter Sterling is an intense person. He does not do things half-heartedly. Peter embodies the advice of the preacher in Ecclesiastes. “Whatever thine hand finds to do, do it with thy might.” This informs both his concern for social justice and his intellectual life. Sometimes combative, visibly thrilled at the adventure of finding things out, Peter is a fully engaged scientist. Not only his experiments, but his joy and passion have enriched our field.

Richard H. Masland

References