

MACARTHUR FELLOWS PROGRAM

It Isn't Easy Being a Genius

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By Jim Collins

Let me begin by making something very clear: I'm not a genius. Tomorrow, 25 people are going to find themselves making similar protestations—at least most of them are—after the MacArthur Foundation announces its latest class of fellows for its so-called genius award. And as someone who once received one of those awards, here's a little insight into what the new fellows experienced over the last few days and what they're going to have to deal with.

Two years ago, I received a call. The person on the other end of the line asked if I was Jim Collins and if I was alone. For a moment, I thought I was receiving an obscene phone call.

The caller then told me I had been selected as a MacArthur fellow. I laughed, convinced this was another well-orchestrated prank by one of my former college roommates. The caller tried to reassure me, and eventually gave me a number to call to confirm the award. The number had a Chicago area code, the home of the MacArthur Foundation. Maybe this was legit.

I called the number and was assured by the folks on the other end that I really had been selected for the award. They then told me I couldn't tell anyone, except my immediate family, until the announcement in a few days.

That night, my wife and I told our young children about the award. Our daughter quickly chimed in that she too was a genius, but her brother was not, because he didn't know all of his colors and he could count only to 10.

The foundation avoids using the term "genius," and stresses that the award (worth \$500,000) is for creativity. Most people, however, play up the genius label. I got my first taste of this the morning the awards were announced. As I left home to get coffee, my neighbor leaned from his second-story window, still in his pajamas, and yelled: "Hey, Jimmy Neutron! I didn't know I was living next to a genius."

Within days, I began to receive requests from family, friends and strangers to evaluate various pet theories, some well

founded, some half-baked, ranging from the therapeutic benefits of magnets to the location of the missing dark matter in the universe. People sought me out for answers and insights, usually prefacing their question with, "You're a genius":

"We just saw 'War of the Worlds': are there aliens out there?"

"What's the difference between an alligator and a crocodile?"

"Does it really take seven years to digest chewing gum?"

"How do you weigh someone's soul?"

Some wanted my advice on which stocks to buy. Interestingly, the only time I felt like a genius was in 1999 and early 2000, when I was investing in high-tech stocks. In April 2000, I began my "Flowers for Algernon" post-brilliance, post-Nasdaq-bubble decline, and quickly picked up the nickname "idiot," several years before the Red Sox made it popular. So I don't give out stock tips.

But here's a little advice to the new fellows. If you're an academic, expect your colleagues to assume that all of your papers are being accepted—little will they know that your work still gets rejected regularly.

And expect not to have a lot of fun with board games. Trivial Pursuit has never been the same. My team always assumes it has the competitive advantage. But once I miss a few questions, my teammates turn on me: "What's the matter with you? You're supposed to be a genius!" The other team chimes in: "Clearly, the MacArthur Foundation made a mistake."

These unrealistically high expectations extend even to children's games. After my daughter recently beat me at Candyland, she looked at me, disenchanted, and said, "Dad, I thought you were supposed to be a genius." I tried to explain that the MacArthur award was for creativity, not genius, and that my creative work did not encompass the selection of colored cards from a randomly shuffled deck. My daughter just slowly shook her head and walked out of the room.

Congratulations new MacArthur fellows, you geniuses.

Jim Collins, a bioengineer and 2003 MacArthur fellow, is a professor at Boston University.