

PROUST Questionnaire

Hartmut “Hucky” Land

Scientist

Often found at the Public Market with an ash-splint basket strapped to his back, wearing sandals over thick socks, Hartmut “Hucky” Land is a gardener and a good friend to many. He also happens to be the chair of the department of biomedical genetics at the University of Rochester and scientific director of the Wilmot Cancer Center. He and associate editor Carlie Fishgold sat down and shared his choice of a 2004 vintage La Louvée Cornas over a Proust questionnaire.



What is your current state of mind?

(Laughter) Oh, very bemused. Or amused. A-bemused.

Your favorite food and drink?

That is one of the hardest questions. Rack of lamb. Favorite drink, very important. Barolo. It's a wine from Piedmont.

Your favorite color?

Green.

Your favorite flower?

I love to garden. (Growling sigh, in thought) Lotus.

Your idea of happiness?

It's totally unimportant ... happiness comes from so many places. It's overrated. It's transient,

but it's really overrated because life is not about happiness.

Do you have any words or beliefs that you live by?

Not at all. As a scientist, I don't “believe.” It's not my MO. I mean, I believe. We all believe lots of stuff, but I don't live by beliefs.

What do you live by?

Good question. Oh, by conviction.

What herb or spice embodies the qualities of your personality best?

Ohhhh, spontaneously, I would say rosemary.

Animal, plant, or mineral? Which one?

Definitely not mineral. Plants. Of course, I have

my animal loves as well. ... Why plant? Because of their great diversity and their great capability to adapt to all conditions, and their long age, their long life span.

Which periodic element do you think best represents the complexities of the universe? Why?

Carbon. Duh.

What are you most afraid of?

Tedious work. I don't like it (laughs).

Do you gravitate towards a specific number?

I pay no attention to numbers. I like concepts. Numbers are just a way to rationalize concepts. For me, it's imagery. It's ideas, and I don't

necessarily have to quantify them, so if I have qualitative concepts and stories and rationales that make sense, then ... that works, right? And so, from that point of view you build a hypothesis. The hypothesis doesn't have numbers in it. It has a question in it. How you address the question and test the question, that may and will have numbers in it, but the number itself isn't as important.

By what are you most influenced?

I'm deeply influenced by being a biologist, and biology is a highly multidimensional set of questions or problems. We don't do very well with quantifying multiple dimensions. From that point of view, science is really not about truth. Science is about models. And understanding them. And playing with ideas, and then testing hypotheses and seeing if you find evidence for them, or if you want to kill a hypothesis. But in the end, the scientific method is about killing hypotheses. It's about killing new ideas. You have to be good at killing new ideas, and if ideas survive, the lot of different attempts of killing ideas will make you take them seriously. It's that, what we play with. So usually, what is dear to your heart at first you have to throw away. And if it comes back in different guises, then it's something that possibly should be taken seriously.

Is there a musical album that changed the way you experience the world?

Unfortunately, not.

What concept or event most drastically altered your understanding of the conscious human experience?

Emergent order. That's a mind-boggling thing. It's a concept that, when you think in terms of human existence as being highly unlikely or unpredictable, emergent order makes the emergence of life rather predictable rather than highly unlikely. I probably was mid-30s in London when I learned of it. How did I come across it? My wife gave me the book “At Home in the Universe” by Stuart Kauffman.

Are you a reader? If so, do you have a favorite author?

No. Which is unfortunate that I haven't found him yet, found her yet. I am not a reader. That means reader of literature. For me, it's very hard to find fiction that I really enjoy. Often, it takes me two-thirds of the book before I find them interesting. I'm used to a lot of granular information, and

books usually operate by holding the information away for a very long time, so the granularity grows for a very long time, and I have trouble with that. Scientific writing is very dense. It's getting out as much information as possible. If I don't get high-density information when I read it, I feel underserved. I really have to force myself to maintain an attention span.

Who are your favorite artists?

In a way, I'm very partial to Joseph Beuys. He did the so-called “Fat Corners.” He's very conceptual. The liberty he took to approach ideas that push the boundary of what artists were dealing with: that point of view is very much what researchers do. So, scientists and artists are very related in terms of how they explore. His non-compromising explorations, and also taking himself seriously, and also the humor that was involved—all that, I find remarkable.

What do you appreciate most in your friends?

Honesty and sharing.

What is your main fault?

Hal Procrastination.

What is your best trait?

Patience.

What is your favorite film?

Actually, I have very few favorite things. There's so much cool stuff around, and there is a lot of diversity around all of these different expressions. I'm not at all about the most or the best or the only, or any of that. Life is so rich, and I love the richness.

Who do you consider a hero?

The hero question? Ahhhhh! Who's my hero? Darwin. I can answer, but let's have a wine-pouring break ... Um, he just revolutionized the way we perceive the world, right, and that's a very hard thing to do. It was, at the time, not popular to do that. It was a very scary thing to come out with.

If your life had a soundtrack, what song would play next?

A Stockhausen piece. Stockhausen, he is a person, a composer. His first name is Karlheinz. Why, it's contemporary. Again, to me it's all about pushing boundaries, looking for the white on the map, and discovering what is in that space. So it's less about a story, less about a song, and

much more about what is in time and space.

What concept do you find exciting right now?

Approaching biology as a multidimensional discipline. ... Each genetic variable is adding a dimension to the problem, not to the world as you perceive it but to the problem that we want to look at. The robustness of living organisms is built on many, many chemical reactions that all happen together that generate self-stabilizing systems. That's where homeostasis comes from. What goes into homeostasis are a lot of different types of circuits that all pulse and flow and are highly dynamic, but can come to a stage where the systems exist in some type of equilibrium. This is a highly complex suit of equilibrium that is constantly changing and yet, you know, we look similar for a long time. How these equilibria really function and what robustness really is at a molecular level—all these types of questions are not really well understood but we are interested in how you can manipulate any of this in a sensible manner medically, but for that you need to understand to some capacity to do it in a smart way. To treat a molecule if you want to treat a disease, the underlying biochemistry is interesting as the underlying biology. The biology is dependent on many, many more biochemical reactions. And so also the same biochemical reaction in different contexts will mean different thing.

If you had walked a different path in life, where might you be?

I appreciate being in the here and now. That doesn't mean I'm always enjoying my here and now, although I'm enjoying here and now very much. ... Make the best decisions you can guess and the best decisions at any moment, or you'll have to deal with the decisions that other people make for you.

Work for yourself or for someone else?

I totally work for myself. I don't want to work for someone else. I think working for someone else is completely not a good option for me. That is also a conceptual thing. It's a mindset. People who work with me work not for me but with me, and they work for themselves but with me and in a team. What I'm very much about is that I want to support people who work with me so that they can grow in the direction that they want to. I think that's very important in everything. That makes life worth living.