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Curiosity: It's in James Watson's genes

A pioneer who discovered the double helix structure of DNA reflects on his own family history in 'Father to Son'

BY MEGAN KIRBY

In 1953, at just 24 years old, James Watson made a discovery that brought him lifelong fame. At Cavendish Laboratory, he and Francis Crick were the first to map the double helix, the structure of DNA. Years before that, Watson learned curiosity, patience and perseverance on bird-watching trips with his father, James D. Watson, Sr.

An avid bird-watcher, Watson Sr. attended Oberlin College because they offered a class on birds (he was expelled from Oberlin after only one year due to poor grades resulting from a battle with scarlet fever). The father and son would ride the streetcar from their home on Chicago's South Side to Jackson Park, looking for certain feather patterns and listening for certain calls. From an early age, Watson learned biology was a science to be actively engaged with, something to be pursued and keenly observed.

"I was encouraged by my father to think," he says. His new book, "Father to Son: Truth, Reason, and

Decency;" focuses on the Watson family legacy. What started as a project to catalog his late father's memorabilia expanded to include generations of Watson history. The discoveries proved fascinating: Watson's relatives panned for gold and rubbed elbows with Abraham Lincoln, playing quiet but essential roles in American history. "I think we may have the gene for being liberal or progressive," Watson says. "We don't want someone else telling us what to do."

Though Watson will always remain famous for his major contributions in genetics and cancer research, he has also been a prolific author, with a number of titles

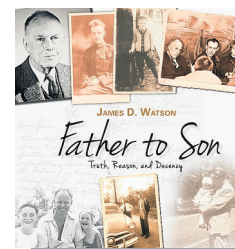
ranging from memoirs to scientific textbooks. His 1968 autobiography, "The Double Helix," was named No. 7 in the Modern Library's Top 100 Nonfiction Books of the Twentieth Century.

"At times, I regret that I had no impact on anything except science," he says. "I'm hoping people will see me from a slightly more humane side."

According to Watson, when he first discovered his father's notes and letters more than six years ago, he planned to put together a booklet for family members. The more he researched and learned about his own ancestry, the bigger the project grew. He also began to reflect on his own upbringing, including the inherited intellectual curiosity that has served him well throughout his career.

"Because of the double helix, I'll always be so famous," Watson says. "People are bound to say, 'Where did he come from?' I certainly say I come from a modest family, but we weren't modest culturally."

When Watson brought the manuscript to Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory Press, Judy Cuddihy came on as



Father to Son

By James D. Watson,
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developmental editor — and found herself just as engrossed in the Watson family history. Under her guidance, the book grew to include more social history and historical details. "There were some gaps in the information, and I have a lot of curiosity. I did manage to fill in quite a few blanks," she says.

"(Watson) got very excited about it, so he started looking around as well." That excitement led Watson to the Lincoln Library in Springfield and the Chicago History Museum, where he continued to collect quotes, photographs and anecdotes for the book.

"I'm kind of amazed at how Dr. Watson saved everything — amazing things from when he was a kid: greeting cards, postcards, all kinds of things that we normally would pitch out," she says. "I think his ultimate biographer will have a treasure trove." Though Watson has researched and taught all over the world, he still considers himself a Chicago story. Sometimes when he visits Chicago, he drives by his childhood home on the South Side. During a trip last month, his schedule was too swamped. He lunched with former Mayor Richard M. Daley and attended the Jean Mitchell Watson Lecture (named for his late mother) at his alma mater, the University of Chicago. There, he presented a statue of his own scientific hero, Charles Darwin, to the biology building.

Although "Father to Son" reflects on the past, Watson, 86, doesn't dedicate all of his time to retrospection. He finds himself hypothesizing daily on things like the cause of ALS or the side effects of Tylenol. Still, he'll always be known foremost as one-half of Watson and Crick, titans in scientific history whose names appear in every biology classroom.

"Most people think I can only talk about the past," he says. "I'm hoping somebody will notice that I'm still alive."

For a man who attended the University of Chicago at 15, won a Nobel Prize at 34, and will always be remembered as one of the greatest scientific minds of the 20th century, Watson can be dismissive of his own intelligence. He attributes his success to one thing: reading.

"To want to read, you have to be curious," he says. "I never felt myself very bright, but I just felt I knew more by reading."

Megan Kirby writes Printers Row Journal's weekly e-reader column. Follow her on Twitter @megankirb.