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Candles, Molecules and Apple Pie

Attention is on the Waldzell Meeting in Melk Abbey: "Everything is so relative."

By Susanne Bobek

He not only experiments in the laboratory but with his life as well. The American Nobel Prize winner in Chemistry, Kary B. Mullis, played a little enfant terrible at the Waldzell Meeting on the meaning of life at Melk Abbey. "No one is listening to you anymore," interrupted him a clearly irritated Carl Djerassi, 'Father of the pill' who was displaced in 1938 and naturalized as Austrian last year. By that time the audience, at least partially, was practically in a trance – understanding only DNA, LSD and molecule.

The Nobel Prize winner in Medicine, Günter Blobel, politely held himself back and explained later: "I didn't understand what he said about his polymerases either." Djerassi referred to Chapter seven of one of his many books: "You'll find everything about that man in there."

At any rate, Mullis is exactly what one would perceive an ingenious researcher to be – a wild chap. When, aged 49, he won the Nobel Prize for his "monumental technology", he became a surfer.

Thanks to his discovery, a single, microscopically small string of genetic DNA material can be multiplied a billion times within hours. A milestone for medical science, genetics and biotechnology. To him we owe the genetic fingerprint.

Mullis explained to his colleagues that from now on he had had enough of Chemistry, invested his prize money in a pizza chain and switched to sporting a surf board. However, after an astoundingly short period of time he was broke and returned to academia. The chemist earned his first publication in *Nature* as a young man – as astrophysicist: with a hypothesis on the structure of the universe. "At Berkley the substances with which I was experimenting were psychedelic. I took LSD and became interested in cosmology."

Mullis had an answer to the meaning of life and the theme happiness that somehow seemed to hover over the entire Waldzell symposium: "Everything is so relative. Sometimes it is easy to be happy."

At least he seemed to be happy on Saturday night as he walked back and forth on the terrace of the library, holding hands. Afterwards he went to the church where Shirin Ebadi, Rabbi Goldberg from London and Abbot Burkhard Ellegast lit candles after a concert by the Philharmonic Orchestra.

The meeting was equally contemplative on Sunday morning: Thomas Hampson and Erwin Ortner, director of the Schoenberg Choir, rehearsed a choral with the 180 participants. At noon, managers – such as Hans Jörg Tengg - tried themselves at kneading dough for apple pie.

Carl Djerassi summed up the difference between art and science: The chemist, who now also writes stage plays, pointed out that in research it is always about being first. "If I had not worked on the pill someone else would have invented it. But if *Faust* had not been written by Goethe *Faust* would not exist."