

Since he decoded the secret wiring scheme of life, Dr. Venter is considered as the most ingenious scientist of our time. His test object: his poodle 'Shadow'.

„My Dog Is More Famous than I Am“

Dr. Venter, why does a world-famous scientist come to an Austrian convent to contemplate for two days?

Good question. I get at least 2 invitations per day to speak in front of an audience somewhere around the globe. I rarely accept, because it is usually a dramatic waste of time. But this invitation was special...

Why?

Just the Benedictine abbey alone is a very special place. And because we as scientists tend to think solely in our own fields, the unbelievable diversity of great personalities from all over the world who came together here this past weekend fascinated me. I was really curious about this cross-over of science, religion and philosophy.

The 'brightest minds' in the world.

You don't say that of yourself. As scientist I just got lucky, just like many others here at Melk. One day I was able to prove what I had discovered. Until I was able to do so, I was attacked, and had to face much criticism, everything was questioned at first. Science is a very conservative field. Just before scientists reach their goal, shortly before the theory is proved, they are very very lonely.

You have decoded the wiring scheme of life, the human genome. How should one imagine it?

First, a code with 3 billion digits. For that, we had to install the third powerful computer in the world in 1999. In 2001 the entire code was published, and for that more than 100 terra bytes were needed: 1 terra byte is 1000 giga bytes. The code in its complexity reached the limits of computer technology.

And what does the code tell us about human life?

The most amazing for me was the realization that the genetic code of the human being does not differ very much from that of the fly, rat, dog or cat. We are not that special...

What then differentiates the human being?

Measured by the genes there are small differences. Parts of the human brain are simply better developed than those of the ape or the dog.

And the human being has a soul.

I would not presume to claim that my dog does not have one. Shadow shows emotions, he feels pain and loss and joy. And he also speaks, just in his own language.

Did you also decode the genetic code of your dog?

Yes, my poodle Shadow is more famous than I am! You can read about his DNA on the internet. In fact, 75% of his genes are identical to those of a human being.

The 'miracle human' does not exist?

From a purely scientific biochemical point of view, no.

What did the decoding of the human genome bring with it?

It certainly furthered medicine by 100 years. In the research of sicknesses we can now proceed from a completely different basis. Now we can discover what genes are responsible for why one person gets cancer and another doesn't.

Dr. Venter, did the decoding of the human genome make you rich?

No. Some guys on Wall Street cashed all the money. I only got a fraction of it.

You are now going on an expedition by ship across the world's oceans to discover new life there.

We will be observing and studying the fascinating world of microbes, these smallest of life forms. And I will be examining the pollution of the waters by plastic and flip-flops. It is shocking how many flip-flops are floating around in some seas.

While science is solving more and more puzzles and mysteries, humans are destroying nature.

Environmental pollution and the resulting climate change are a problem the world can no longer ignore. A 'future with meaning' as we have defined it at the Waldzell Meeting, is only possible when we face this issue with all of its consequences.

If you could decide what would you do?

I would invest a lot of money in the research of alternative energy. Europe is investing alarmingly little in this respect. And I would set up 'millennium' clocks.

What for?

Friends of mine are developing these clocks right now. They don't indicate hours, days or years but millions and billions of years. Looking at a clock like that would remind us that we must look further ahead than just at the next generation. That we carry more responsibility than just for ourselves and just for this century.

Lonesome "Lord of Genes"

15 years ago the 'human genome project', a world wide research program to decode the entire human genome from 3 billion DNA-bases, began. Since Craig Venter's revolutionary 'random shotgun' method did not receive any official funding, in 1992 he went into business for himself and founded the Institute for Genomic Research that was successful in the first decoding of a complete genome of the bacteria *Haemophilus influenzae* already in 1995. This was the first completely decoded free-living organism and a worldwide sensation. Today, more than 1000 scientists work round the clock on decoding DNA using high-tech machines at Craig Venter's company. Dr. Venter, repeatedly awarded the 'Man of the Year' (Times, Financial Times) title, is member of the National Academy of Sciences, the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, and the American Society for Microbiology. The 'Lord of Genes', as he is often called, was also among those personalities whom Desmond Tutu chose for his traveling exhibition "Hands that Shape Humanity".