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Celebrating Creativity

By John V. Lombardi May 8, 2007
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Although much that comes across the academic administrative desk shines with the bright light of pride and promotion -- expensively produced with high quality paper and commercial

production values, creative layout and design, and magnetically attractive photography -- a few items arrive with impressive calm, quietly. In this case, it's a small book that looks like a scholarly journal in an obscure area of the humanities. The paper is soft, the cover appears faded; there are no pictures, no dramatic announcements, no claims of cosmic significance. Instead the *Reports of the President and Treasurer of the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation* (2005) arrives in the mail with the unassuming confidence of a longstanding enterprise of uncontested substance.

Just under 200 pages, printed in a small scholarly typeface, the book consists primarily of the names and mini-biographies of the individuals awarded Guggenheim fellowships. The preliminary material speaks gracefully of the Guggenheim's mission, thanks in a quiet way those who have helped, and provides a short financial report. Then the main content follows: page after page of information about the fellows, distinguished and interesting people from their bios, but impressive for the Guggenheim's practice of telling us almost nothing about the projects for which they have received these prestigious awards. Sometimes we can guess from the title, "Appointed for a study of the global depletion of nonrenewable energy resources," although this surely is but a hint of the actual project. Others are even less helpful as "Appointed for music composition." Is this for a song, an opera, a string quartet, a jazz concerto? We do not need to know, for the value celebrated here is the individual, not the work.

In our competitive academic meritocracy, where specific differentiation of intellectual activity often defines career success, this sparse report offers a different perspective. The Guggenheim, as the foundation explains in its introduction, is about supporting people whose past performance and future promise predict good work. It is about having faith that these people will do very good things on their own, driven by their personal commitment to their academic, intellectual, and artistic convictions. The Guggenheim report tells us that the foundation believes in these people by funding their personal effort. The Foundation does not ask for a specific product or a particular return on its investment, but instead simply selects individuals and asks them to be as productive and creative as they choose to be. Such open ended faith, in our endlessly regulated world, is a joy to behold. Such a commitment to the process of academic, intellectual, and artistic creativity. Such an old-school sense of confidence in the judgment of their reviewers and the quality of their Fellows.

Much in the way a quiet walk in a graceful garden or time spent in an elegant museum provides peace and inspiration, a

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moment perusing the Guggenheim report (delivered without any sense of urgency in 2007, compiled in 2006, and reflecting the activities of 2005) reminds us of the timeless primacy of the personal creativity of our colleagues.

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