

CITY NEWS



Adrienne Grunwald for The Wall Street Journal

Nobelist Paul Greengard and sculptor Ursula von Rydingsvard established a prize to recognize outstanding achievements by female scientists.

URBAN GARDNER | By Ralph Gardner Jr.

The Mind and Its Mysteries



While it occurs far too infrequently, I sometimes have a creative thought.

And when the lucky event occurs, as often as not, it seems to arrive fully formed—out of nowhere. I'm happy to take credit, even though it doesn't feel as if I deserve any.

It was just such a neurological phenomenon that I was eager to discuss with Nobel Prize winner Paul Greengard when we got together one morning at the sunny, art- and orchid-filled East Side apartment that he shares with his wife, the sculptor Ursula von Rydingsvard.

Most Prof. Greengard's academic career—these days, he's the Vincent Astor professor at Rockefeller University—has been dedicated to studying the underlying mechanisms by which nerve cells communicate with each other, specifically in the brain.

Prof. Greengard, who was awarded the Nobel Prize for medicine in 2000, tried to put his discoveries in layman's terms.

"The work prior to what I did was the hardware of the brain," he explained. "What we did was the software of the brain."

Nonetheless, Prof. Greengard expressed something approaching ignorance about what happens at that specific moment when I—or anybody else, for that matter—experiences what I suppose is commonly called inspiration.

His recent major research has been to study how drugs used to treat disorders such as depression, schizophrenia and Parkinson's disease achieve their effects.

"Nobody knows as much about it," boasted Ms. von Rydingsvard, seated at her husband's side.

"Nobody knows more about it," the Nobelist corrected her. "Modesty isn't one of my strong suits."

But Prof. Greengard displayed modesty, even if uncharacteristic, at my question about creativity.

"There's such a gap between what we know at the molecular level and what at the whole organ level.

"We do know from my own work on depression that there seems to be several different parts of the brain involved. Different parts of the brain are all speaking to each other. We're trying to figure out how they're speaking to each other."

The biophysicist continued: "I'm sure our brains are working unconsciously. When you have a creative thought, it's parts of the brain talking to each other without your awareness."

The work of these hidden conclaves sometimes bubble to the surface, allowing us to claim credit for them.

Prof. Greengard was born 89 years ago in Brooklyn. His mother, Pearl Meister, died in childbirth. His father, a vaudeville performer-turned-businessman, remarried 13 months later.

As tragic as the circum-

stances surrounding his birth, it isn't something Prof. Greengard shies away from. Indeed, it seems to have helped forge his personality and his success.

"They lied to me and said my stepmother was my mother," he told me near the end of our interview. "I was reared by a monstrous stepmother. But I'm OK now.

"I have a lot of confidence through my accomplishments. I'm always trying to prove I'm not the worthless child they say I was."

'I'm sure our brains are working unconsciously.'

I might not have included that somber note, except Prof. Greengard's difficult boyhood has influenced science even beyond his research and the Nobel Prize.

The biophysicist and Ms. von Rydingsvard established the \$100,000 Pearl Meister Greengard Prize, in partnership with other supporters of Rockefeller University.

It's awarded annually to women for outstanding achievements in science. Two recipients have gone on to win Nobel Prizes themselves.

The 2014 award went to Lucy Shapiro, a developmental biologist at Stanford University.

Prof. Greengard said he came up with the idea to honor his mother's memory on the morning in 2000 when he, or rather his wife, was roused at 5:30 a.m. by a caller from Sweden who wanted to speak with him.

"I said, 'Do you really want me to wake him?'" Ms. von Rydingsvard remembered. "He said, 'My name is Hans and I'm

the secretary of the Nobel Prize Committee.'"

Later that morning, on his way from his laboratory to the university's auditorium to celebrate his honor with his colleagues, Prof. Greengard brought up the idea of creating an award for female scientists.

"Paul said, 'What would you think if we donated the prize money to women who had done exceptional research?'" Ms. von Rydingsvard recalled.

Prof. Greengard split the \$1 million with two other scientists, Arvid Carlsson and Eric Kandel.

Many of Ms. von Rydingsvard's works are monumental, made from materials such as cedar and bronze. One, "Ona," a 20-foot-tall bronze sculpture, stands in front of Barclays Center.

The works look like objects you might stumble across in the forest, if the forest was enchanted. In that respect, perhaps the sculptor and her husband's explorations into the underlying structure of things aren't that divergent.

Before we parted, I asked Prof. Greengard about another brain function that most of us experience but seems to fall almost within the realm of the supernatural: déjà vu.

"Right now, it's impossible to make a reasonable hypothesis about the basis of that phenomenon," he said. "The knowledge we have of communication among cells does not permit my giving you a sophisticated understanding."

Though, the professor seems to concede its existence.

"How many times have I opened the door for you before you rang the buzzer?" Ms. von Rydingsvard asked.

"It freaks me out," her husband admitted.

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CORRECTIONS & AMPLIFICATIONS

Josh Kushner of Thrive Capital was incorrectly listed among the guests at a Details party described in the Heard & Scene column on Thursday.

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