

**MEMORIAL RESOLUTION OF THE FACULTY OF THE  
UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON**

**ON THE DEATH OF PROFESSOR EMERITUS VAN RENSSELAER POTTER II**

Van Rensselaer Potter II was truly a "man for all seasons" in the eyes of everyone who knew him. Dr. Potter was a biochemist who devoted his entire scientific career first to cancer research and then pioneered efforts to develop the new field named by him as bioethics. He was a professor of oncology at the McArdle Laboratory for Cancer Research at the University of Wisconsin-Madison for more than 50 years, including his emeritus status.

Dr. Potter was born on August 27, 1911 on the farm his paternal grandparents had homesteaded in northeast South Dakota, on the edge of the Coteau de Prairie in 1882. His grandfather died the year before he was born, and he was given his name. Van graduated from nearby Pierpont High School in 1928 in a class of 12. In the fall of that year he entered South Dakota State College in Brookings. Dr. Potter received his B.S. degree with high honors in 1933, majoring in chemistry and biology. He came to the University of Wisconsin-Madison in 1935, having received a Wisconsin Alumni Research Foundation Fellowship in the Department of Biochemistry, working with Professor Conrad Elvehjem. During that year he married Vivian Christensen. He received his Ph.D. in biochemistry in 1938. He was able to secure a National Research Council Postdoctoral Fellowship and went to Stockholm, Sweden to work with Professor Hans von Euler at the Biokemiska Institutet. Before he could begin a second year of postdoctoral studies in England, World War II erupted and he returned to the United States to the University of Chicago, where he studied for some months with Professor Thorfin Hogness. Dr. Potter contacted Professor Elvehjem in Madison and interviewed for a position in the McArdle Laboratory for Cancer Research, which was then being developed with Dr. Harold Rusch as director. In 1940 he was appointed to the faculty of the University of Wisconsin-Madison as the then only staff member at McArdle along with Dr. Rusch. Dr. Potter advanced to full professor in 1947.

In the words of Professor James Trosko of Michigan State University, one of Dr. Potter's fellows, "The joys of science as a creative human activity were as tidal waves that shaped his (Potter's) view of science." He was among the earliest biochemists in this country to apply this science to an understanding of the neoplastic process. His concept of "Oncogeny is blocked Ontogeny" arose from numerous comparisons of the enzymology of transplantable liver neoplasms derived from chemically induced primary hepatic neoplasms. While no two neoplasms were exactly alike, the patterns seen resembled those of fetal or immature liver, never progressing to the adult pattern. His experiments on the inhibition of metabolic pathways aided in the development of combination chemotherapy, which is today a mainstay for the clinical treatment of many neoplasms. As scientific knowledge pointed to carcinogenesis as a multistage process exhibiting phenotypic diversity, he led the field in attempting to separate significant genetic and enzymatic alterations from extraneous ones not concerned with carcinogenesis, resulting in his "Minimal Deviation Hypothesis". But his greatest contribution to the scientific community is the more than 90 postdoctoral fellows and graduate students whom he trained and inspired, many of whom became prominent in various scientific fields and one of whom received the Nobel Prize. Dr. Potter's extraordinary achievements included being elected to membership in the National Academy of Sciences, the National Academy of the Arts and Sciences, and as president of the American Society for Cell Biology and of the American Association for Cancer Research. Van viewed science not as a "job" but as an ethical, passionate, and creative experience. Furthermore, he could not separate the scientist from the scientific process or the scientist from the social context of the scientific enterprise. This philosophy, motivated by his concept of "humility with responsibility," led him into the final phase of his productive career.

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As a reflection of his innate responsibility to society, Dr. Potter entered the local political scene in 1960 on the side of those who were actively trying to gain support for the Frank Lloyd Wright vision of a city-sponsored building on the shores of Lake Monona in Madison. He became president of Citizens for Monona Terrace and was elected to serve on the Mayor's Auditorium Committee under Mayor Otto Festge. He conceived his vision of a Monona basin project, coupling the terrace building with a congruent structure on the opposite shore. All efforts failed at that time, but 30 years later the Monona Terrace was approved, built, and dedicated on July 18, 1997.

The term bioethics was coined by Dr. Potter in 1970 as a bridge between science and humanity in the service of worldwide human health in a protective environment. This concept was not to be equated with the narrow area of ethical issues related to new advances in biomedical research. He first described his broader view in his book *Bioethics: Bridge to the Future*, which was dedicated to Aldo Leopold, a well-known Wisconsin professor who had much earlier called for a "land ethic." Dr. Potter felt that all our human choices not only have consequences that are short term on the ecosystem and all life systems and societies, but also have long-term consequences for the future, some of which are predictable, others not. His bioethics, further elucidated in his second book, *Global Bioethics*, was a philosophy integrating a realistic scientific view of the world that could be applied to religious/philosophical systems, such as the values derived from these traditional sources consistent with the scientific view of the human and human nature. His nomination as a Leonardo Scholar (1973) at the University of Wisconsin speaks volumes about his intense concern for the original purpose of the university. The article, "Purpose and Function of the University," a co-authored product of the Interdisciplinary Studies Committee on the Future of Man at the University of Wisconsin, of which Van was the chairperson, illustrated his commitment to the future of humankind and the tremendous responsibilities we as academicians have in the transmission of both knowledge and bioethical values.

The world's most catastrophic events of terrorism occurred in New York and Washington D.C. just a few days after Dr. Potter's death in September. To ignore this historic event in the context of Van's bioethical philosophy is to ignore the very reason he committed his life to educating all to the meaning of "bioethics". In our pluralistic and incompatible world views, which have left billions in miserable survival conditions and the whole world in a global ecological challenge, a lack of "bioethical" philosophy must be considered as a component of the motivation for such horrible acts. Van was a devoted husband to his wife, Vivian, a loving father to his children, Karin, John, and Toby, to his six grandchildren, and to his extended family, an inspiring teacher/scholar to his students, and a creative scientist to his peers. In the final analysis, Van was an enlightened human being concerned for the humane treatment of all to be able to live in a sustainable, esthetic world, not a utopia, but one where an individual might live a happy and satisfying life.

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