

Presentation of the Distinguished Public Service Award of the Mineralogical Society of America for 2001 to Jeffery Post

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Mr. President, Honorees, Members of MSA:

Have you ever asked yourselves how many people actually read the papers that we write? I think we tend not to, because the honest answer is so depressing when we consider the labor and love that infuse every manuscript we submit for publication. At the same time we must grudgingly admit that the narrowness of our audience provides a level of comfort that is not wholly unwelcome. Our efforts to reshape the status quo generally excite only a small circle of specialists. It takes an exceptional discovery for news of our research to penetrate into the “real world.” Most of the science in which we are engaged is a pretty cozy affair.

Now imagine that you are asked to produce a work that will be scrutinized by 30 000 people—every single day—for at least the next 30 years. Your audience will include the United States Senators and Representatives who control the financing for your institution as a line-item in the Congressional budget; it will include authorities in every field of the geosciences, who will expect their areas of expertise to be represented accurately and comprehensively; it will include all manner of celebrities, who will insist on—and receive—personalized tours; and mostly it will include regular people, who hope not merely to be entertained, but, because they are at the Smithsonian, to be awed.

This was the charge that was handed to Jeff Post, the Curator of Gems and Minerals at the National Museum of Natural History and this year’s recipient of the Distinguished Public Service Medal. When Jeff arrived at the Smithsonian in 1984, the Gem and Mineral Hall already was over 20 years old. Although the mineral display was avant garde in 1965, by the end of the century it showed its age in every way. The dull, flat wall colors and the fluorescent lighting did grave injustice to the spectacular brilliance of the gems. The labels were either densely detailed or absurdly succinct. The Hope Diamond, which is the most visited of all objects in the vast Smithsonian collection, lay muted behind thick, dark glass and was announced by a plaque that gave only its name. The curatorial philosophy felt as antique as the stones themselves. Crystallography and mineral classification served as the organizing principles behind the displays, and modern advances in mineral science were accommodated through special, and often temporary, exhibits.

From 1989 to 1998, Jeff led the effort to turn the Gem and Mineral Hall into a prototype for the twenty-first century. Jeff will be the first to insist that he did not accomplish this project

alone. Over 100 people contributed to the renovation, and his collaborators included not only his geological colleagues in the Department of Mineral Sciences at the Smithsonian but legions of designers, writers, carpenters, electricians, and security experts. Nevertheless, in the words of a reporter for the *Baltimore Sun*, “if [the new exhibit] had one midwife, it was Jeff Post.” Jeff met with scores of potential donors to the project, and he was a critical part of the development effort that raised the thirteen million dollars that created the Janet Annenberg Hooker Hall of Geology, Gems, and Minerals. He traveled to science museums all over the world to learn the most effective ways of communicating complicated ideas to a diverse audience. And he worked intensively on the style and organization of the exhibits and on the countless iterations of the script that illuminates them.

Good science is about telling stories, and Jeff re-conceived the Smithsonian Mineral Hall as a narrative of how the world works, as illustrated by some of its most improbable inventions. The gemstones, though lovely to look at, are included because they are minerals, and the minerals are included because they are the primary elements of rocks. And it is rocks that tell us the history, and the future, of the Earth. As Jeff’s former student, it is impossible for me to walk through the re-vivified Gem and Mineral Hall and not recognize his imprint on every part. It is apparent in the simplicity and clarity of the presentation, the esthetic of the design, and, above all, in the unabashed joy in the natural wonders that we in this room are lucky enough to study for a living.

The Hall has garnered unqualified compliments. The *Washington Post*, a sometime critic of Smithsonian projects, found the Mineral Hall to be “irresistibly attractive and stealthily instructive.” Overall, the *Post* says, it is “a creation of great style and even greater substance.” This enthusiasm was shared by a host of international news outlets, from the *New York Times* to the *Columbus Dispatch*. Jeff has pulled off one of the most visible victories that the mineralogy community could desire.

For all of his undisputed success in restructuring the Mineral Hall, it would be wrong to suggest that this service medal is being awarded solely on the basis of the renovation. As with all sterling curators, of which our society boasts a healthy number, Jeff has striven to make his museum a professional resource for mineralogists. He oversees one of the largest, most diverse, and most actively used research collections in the world, and he has been an ardent publicist for the scientific

arm of the Natural History Museum. In addition, Jeff has been an energetic ambassador for mineralogy by meeting with visitors who range from foreign dignitaries to inner-city school children. He has authored a delightful book on the Smithsonian minerals that has sold even more copies than the *Reviews in Mineralogy* volume that he co-edited with Dave Bish. That text, by the way, on powder X-ray diffraction, remains the all-time best seller in the *RiMG* series. On top of all this responsibility, Jeff somehow sustains a vigorous research program and is the heart of MSA's Mineral Structures Interest Group.

I will close with a true story about Jeff. I got to know Jeff when he served as a teaching assistant in Charlie Burnham's introductory mineralogy course. Through a combination of the rising price of oil and of Charlie's reputation as the best teacher at Harvard, the enrollment in Geology 14 that year burgeoned to over 50 students. As a result, Charlie twisted the arm of his loyal postdoc to assist Fred Allen and Paige Chamberlain with the lab sections of the course, and Jeff became my TA. It was a time of tremendous construction in Harvard Square, and one sunny afternoon Jeff and I were walking across the yard and discussing the building stones used for the renovations. I of-

fered the opinion that the dark stones being set in front of one edifice were not as attractive as the granite posts near one of the science buildings. Ever the instructor, Jeff responded that the posts I had in mind were not igneous but metamorphic. I objected, but soon enough the telltale gneissic banding of the stones in question came into view. As so often has been the case, I had to admit that in spite of my spiritual superiority, Jeff was factually correct.

But rather than looking pleased with his small victory, Jeff looked oddly pained. When I asked what was wrong, he shook his head and said, "That's the problem with this world. Too many people take gneiss posts for granite."

With this award, our society is making a clear statement that we do not take this nice Post for granted. Rather, we are expressing our appreciation for the special role that museums play in publicizing the substance and significance of the mineral sciences, and we are recognizing what one person with vision and vitality can do for an entire community. Mr. President, it gives me great pleasure to introduce the recipient of this year's Distinguished Public Service Award, Jeffrey Post.