

—President's Message

“Until humans learn to tolerate—no, that’s not enough; to positively value each other—until we can value the diversity here on Earth, then we don’t deserve to go into outer space.”

—Gene Roddenberry (Creator of “Star Trek”)

I have often wondered what it is about working as a modern scientist or engineer, and particularly in optics R&D, that makes us different from those in other professions. Many professions are intellectually stimulating and challenging. But what is it that sets us apart?

One thing is the field’s global nature. Our profession is appreciated by people around the world; virtually every society has an inherent interest in, and positive outlook on, what we do. The people in our field come from everywhere on the planet, and interaction among this diverse crowd occurs at all OSA meetings, as well as in routine business travel—as nearly all companies in optics are global.

But the interactions are much deeper and more intimate than that. I can’t think of any graduate school or company in our field that doesn’t have an amazingly diverse workforce. Almost every interaction I have in optics exposes me to diversity in culture, religion, upbringing and circumstance, and each brings something special and unique to the table. What does that mean to me? It represents a unique opportunity to grow personally—and to share my own background with others.

The text *Ethics of Our Fathers* asks, “Who is a wise person?” and answers “One who learns from everyone.” Learning from different people does indeed enrich us in wonderful and unexpected ways. And noble and important as it is to respect and accommodate the background of others, it’s also important to actively celebrate the diversity that our colleagues offer us.

My students and close colleagues have originated from many cultures, religions and countries. I love learning from them about their own unique perspectives, and I try to find those special attributes that might also help me be a better person and colleague. Many of those interactions have occurred through working on OSA committees with people from around the world.

(And those interactions can be instructive. Once, when helping organize an activity with a colleague from Japan, I kept trying to give my opinion on ways he could approach his task. Each time, he said, “Hmmm, that might be difficult.” A bystander—noticing me being culturally tone deaf—finally pulled me aside and said, “In Japan, that is the polite way of saying ‘no.’” Another lesson learned!)

Why have I spent this month’s message reflecting on our field’s diversity? Because I strongly believe that it translates into better optical science and engineering and a more fulfilling career environment.

I encourage everyone to become ever more involved in OSA activities, and to celebrate the wonderful people that those activities bring together from around the world. And as the years go by, and through all of our future activities with OSA and elsewhere, I hope that we continue to cherish the intellectual and cultural richness of our community.



OSA

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Respectfully and warmly submitted,

Alan Willner,
OSA President