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I grew up in a small Wisconsin town called Menomonee Falls. My interest in chemistry was sparked in high school by my chemistry teacher, Luther Koplin. My academic advisor in high school thought that MIT was the best school in the world and convinced me I should go there. Little did we know that I was a "geographical accept" taken to give some state-wide balance to the student body. In comparison to most of the freshmen from high-powered prep schools, I was way behind in all areas. I received a detailed lesson in how it feels to be at the bottom of the class. I also joined the crew team and learned the joys of intense physical activity, dedication, and teamwork.

Unfortunately, at that time MIT, like many schools, assigned their starting assistant professors to freshman chemistry to see if they would survive this challenging teaching assignment. My chemistry professors were inexperienced teachers and hardly inspiring. Given the high cost of private school tuition and the low level of my chemistry instruction, I decided to transfer to the University of Wisconsin. Chemistry continued to be my first area of interest based on courses, but I really got hooked my senior year when I did undergraduate research in the laboratory of Professor Donald F. Gaines.

I chose the Gaines lab for my undergraduate research because he required only 10 hours per week and the other professors required 12 hours. I had a large time commitment to the rowing program and felt I should economize on research time. It wasn't long, however, until I was spending over 24 hours a week in the lab. It was so exciting that I could not stay away. Yet I still had time to letter in crew.

Professor Gaines worked on boron hydride compounds that were colorless gases that exploded if exposed to air or water. It was a challenging environment to begin undergraduate research. Once in the Gaines lab, I was in the "boron pipeline" for my future research. Professor Gaines introduced me to future Ph.D. advisor, Professor M. Frederick Hawthorne, a prominent boron chemist at UCLA, and Professor Hawthorne introduced me to my future postdoctoral advisor, Professor Earl L. Muetterties, a former boron chemist who was then working on transition metal chemistry at Cornell. Hence, my early choice of the Gaines group based on his flexibility with a time commitment rather than any academic reason set my future course of research!

I subsequently joined the faculty at the University of Chicago and was told that to get tenure there you have to be the best in the world in your area. This fit well with my plans. I wanted to work in a frontier area of science in which little was known. I figured
that if my topic was sufficiently unusual, I would be the only one in the area and therefore the best! Of course, the challenge in this strategy was to find an area that was also scientifically important.

I started working with the lanthanide metals, the topic of my lecture, because the chemical community assumed they were useless and uninteresting. They had some unique physical properties, but no interesting chemistry. I thought that if I could put them in the proper chemical environments, they would display unique chemistry. This strategy has been verified in many ways both in my laboratory and in laboratories around the world that have subsequently moved into this field.

I have always felt that it was beneficial that I came into the lanthanide area with no prior experience. I was naïve, but unprejudiced. I made no assumptions about the chemistry and we tried experiments no conventionally-trained lanthanide chemist would think of. Initially, this was difficult and for the first two years we had few results. However, after that we discovered a series of unprecedented molecules and reactions that continues to develop to this day.

In 1981, I was delighted to find out that UCI had an interest in recruiting me from Chicago. The outstanding departmental research facilities present at UCI made this a very attractive place to do research. My decision to leave a tenured position at the older, world famous, University of Chicago to come to the "New University," UCI, was as unorthodox as my original research area, but it has proven to be a great move in all respects. I am very grateful for the opportunity to be at UCI and I look forward to continuing to make contributions in both research and teaching.