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origin of life

STANFORD UNIVERSITY MEDICAL CENTER

DEPARTMENT OF GENETICS

COPY

February 1, 1977

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Mrs. Jeanne Wolf
WPBT
Community Television Foundation of South Florida, Inc.
The James I. Keller Public Telecommunications Center
14901 N.E. 20th Avenue
North Miami, Florida

Dear Mrs. Wolf,

I enjoyed our discussion the other day about the possibility of developing a program around the origin of life as a theme. It seems to me this would be an excellent vehicle with which to present both a wide range of interesting contemporary scientific thought, experimental approaches, and the still not totally vanquished audacity of scientists about asking ultimate questions about nature without regard to their pragmatic benefits. (I must admit even as I dictate those words, I want to refrain from any dogmatism that understanding the origin of life will not be of substantial practical benefit).

You asked me to communicate my views on the overall project which I am happy to do by the present letter. More than many areas of science I think the origin of life lends itself to the television medium although obviously not in the sense of being able to furnish pictorial documentation of the actual event! I do think that the video-picture is an excellent way to portray the dynamic aspects of chemical reaction at one end of the size scale and the cosmic setting on the other. The basic challenges in this field are also relatively straight forward and should be easy to comprehend without a great deal of technical preparation - perhaps the opposite would have to be said about the solutions that we eventually will have to contrive.

So, I am all for such a program in principle. Its materialization in fact will of course have to depend on the possibility of recruiting a first-class scientific journalist or journalistically inclined scientist to help function as a critical funnel in the collection and digestion of ideas in the development of the program. Besides the people that I mentioned to you before, I think of Walter Sullivan who did such a splendid job on the somewhat analogous story of continental drift in his book. He in fact might be a splendid person to consult about possible resources, not to exclude himself for the purpose I just mentioned. I would also mention the name of David Perlman of the San Francisco Chronicle.

Did you have a chance to talk to Professor Melvin Calvin of the University of California during your recent visit? He has been personally interested and involved in this field, and I believe he may have produced at least an audio-cassette if not a small show on the subject with the American Chemical Society. Another person you might wish to contact is Phil Abelson, who is editor of Science Magazine in Washington and also an erstwhile investigator in the field.

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As I indicated to you, I would be happy to stay in touch with you on this project and the limitations of time rather than enthusiasm is the reason that would keep me from taking a more extensive role.

Sincerely yours,

Joshua Lederberg
Professor of Genetics

JL/rr

cc: Dick Young