Acceptance Speech of

Dr. J. Craig Venter

Winner of the 2000

King Faisal International Prize for Science

Sunday 14 May 2000 (10 Safar 1421H.)

Your Royal Highness, Prince Sultan ibn Abd Al Aziz

Your Royal Highnesses

Your Excellencies

Distinguished Guests

I am extremely honored to be receiving the King Faisal International Prize for Science and I feel especially privileged to be the co-recipient of this award with Professor Edward Osborne Wilson, a man whose work has inspired me and who I have admired for many years.

I stand before you to accept this award on behalf of two exceptional teams of scientists from The Institute for Genomic Research and Celera Genomics. Genomics requires a multidisciplinary team effort with experts from molecular biology, biochemistry, physiology, genetics, algorithm and software development and high-end computing. There are a few distinguished scientists whose collaborative efforts have been key to our success, including my wife Dr. Claire M. Fraser, Dr. Hamilton O.

Smith, Dr. Mark Adams, Dr. Gene Myers and Dr. Granger Sutton. It has been a privilege to lead such distinguished teams.

I would also like to acknowledge the thousands of scientists around the world who have gone before us in the quest to better understand life at its most basic level. Without the earlier work of those scientists, we could not have achieved the first decoding of the genetic code of free-living species or of the human genome. The beauty of science is that important discoveries are made by building on the discoveries of those that came before us. I continue to be humbled by the work of those pioneering individuals in the broad array of disciplines that we had to bring together.

As a young man serving as a medical corpsman in the Vietnam War, I learned first hand how tenuous our hold on life can be. It was there that my interest was peaked in learning how the trillions of cells in our bodies work and interact and how life is created and sustained. I wondered why it was that some of us live through devastating trauma to our bodies and others die from seemingly small wounds. In the midst of the horrors of this war I also realized how valuable our time on earth is and the necessity to use every day to its fullest.

I firmly believe that this life-altering experience gave me my insatiable quest for an understanding of life at the most basic level. One of the wonderful discoveries that I have made while trying to decode the DNA of now well over a dozen species from viruses to bacteria to plants

to insects, and now the human genome, is that we are all connected through the commonality of the genetic code and evolution. When life is brought to its very essence, we find that we have much in common with every species on earth and that we are not so different from one another. It is my belief that the basic knowledge that we are providing to the world will have a profound impact on the human condition and treatment for disease and on our view of ourselves in the biological continuum. I am concerned however that some will want to use this new knowledge as a basis of discrimination and power. In each society we must work toward higher science literacy and the wise use of our common heritage.

I entered science to find understanding and perhaps change the world in some small way. Thank you again for this award for which I am profoundly grateful. I will strive to uphold the standards of the King Faisal Foundation as I continue my work in understanding life.