

## Alan Turing

Joanna Davies

President & CEO, San Diego Biomedical Research Institute

As we learn more about Alan Turing, the “man behind the myth,” it is tempting to speculate that his focus on solving the problem at hand rather than the sensitivities of the people around him was, although extreme, an advantage to reaching his goal. Perhaps we have harshly judged his persona as insensitive and harsh, but it can be argued that he wasn’t driven by ego, selfishness and arrogance, but rather by an untainted need for solution.

It is perhaps not surprising that he chose to pursue questions in biology after his accomplishments in mathematics and computer science. Biology, whether plant or animal, is precise. Nature requires that molecules interact with each other in a balanced and highly functional manner. Cells of different types collaborate within tissues, and tissues with each other in an organized fashion. A cell type with an ego, a lack of collaborative spirit, one that chooses to expand its numbers beyond what is necessary, will cause a diminished function of the organism as a whole. This might manifest itself as anything from cancer, to diabetes, to susceptibility to infection. Perhaps Alan understood and appreciated the relationship between molecules, cells, and tissues better than he did the relationships between people. Or perhaps he completely understood that to maintain the health of an organism, whether that organism is a plant, the human body, a village, city, country, continent, or beyond, anything less than optimal collaboration and communication, without the distraction of self-promotion, will result in chaos.

If a critical problem must be solved, does personality in those selected to solve it matter, and if so, what personalities are acceptable or even preferable? Clearly the ideal collaborator is much more than knowledge gained or how smart a person is. An equivalent need to solve a highly defined problem must at least be considered an important, if not the most important, requirement. Distractions are inevitable and acceptable, but perhaps those traits that actively delay progress in achieving the solution, including self-promotion, should be avoided.