Acceptance speech (Mercouri Kanatzidis)

Distinguished colleagues, members of the World Cultural Council, ladies and gentlemen,

Oh, what a day, this is truly unbelievable! To stand here and receive the Albert Einstein World Award of Science is beyond anything I could have imagined. I feel an overwhelming sense of joy, gratitude, and humility at this extraordinary honor.

To be recognized in this way, and to join the company of past recipients, is both humbling and inspiring. I thank the Council for this extraordinary distinction and for its mission of celebrating the pursuit of knowledge and creativity across science, education, and the arts.

This award acknowledges work that I did not achieve alone. I want to recognize the remarkable students, postdoctoral fellows, and collaborators who shared their talent, persistence, and imagination with me. I also wish to thank my wife, Faith Kanatzidis, and my family, whose unwavering support has sustained me through many years of research. And there is one group that is rarely acknowledged but deserves our gratitude: the American taxpayer. It is their investment in fundamental science, and the freedom we were given to pursue new ideas, that makes possible the breakthroughs we celebrate today.

When I reflect on the path that led here, I recall a moment of doubt. Over a decade ago, when we first decided to explore halide perovskites for solar cells, I had very low expectations. Conventional wisdom said these materials would never perform at the level needed. I remember thinking, “Well, at least this will make for a quick failure and we can move on.” Yet, to my surprise, and to the surprise of many others, those “unlikely” materials became central to the perovskite era in photovoltaics. In fact, some of our early papers were even rejected by editors and conference co-organizers who didn’t believe the work had much future. Looking back, I sometimes say it was the rare occasion when my lack of confidence worked in my favor, because the results arrived long before my optimism did.

This journey underscores something essential: the power of basic, curiosity-driven research. When we ask questions without knowing the answers, when we allow ourselves to follow an intuition that seems improbable, we sometimes uncover discoveries that can transform our world. Perovskites have become one such story, reminding us that science, at its best, changes not only what we know but how we live.

As I accept this award, I do so with gratitude and humility, and also with renewed faith in the enduring value of scientific exploration. May we continue to support and celebrate the search for knowledge, for it is this search that leads to a better, more sustainable future for all.

Thank you.