

Commentary

On Stephen Jay Gould

Steve Gould was a new faculty member at the Harvard Museum of Comparative Zoology when I first met him in the late 1960s. Even then, when he was just freshly out of graduate school, he was unusual among the biologists I knew in his knowledge of history, philosophy and literature. This breadth seemed natural, part of a positive, exuberant attitude toward learning and life that embraced the humanities alongside science, and the general public alongside scientists.

Gould's scientific inspiration, including the idea of punctuated evolutionary change, came from his studies of fossil snails. His doctoral thesis on a genus of fossil and extant snails of Bermuda, published in 1967, early established his scientific reputation. His 1977 book *Ontogeny and Phylogeny* is a brilliant scholarly clarification of the history and meaning of heterochrony in evolution that still stands as a landmark in the study of development and evolution.

In a recent interview (New York Times, 1 June 2002) Steve expressed a belief that one can address both the general and the scientific publics "at the same conceptual depth". This approach made him a charismatic writer and speaker for a very wide audience both within and outside science, but was not always successful among specialists. For an audience of professional evolutionists, the one-style-fits-all approach sometimes sounded overly simple and condescending. Nonetheless, academic audiences would throng to his lectures and be among the first to buy his books.

No other biologist of his generation, and perhaps since Darwin, has done so much to inform the world at large about evolution. I once sent Steve some Japanese translations of his books that I found in a bookstore in Kyoto, but of course he was used to having his multiple books appear in multiple languages. His personal charm could disarm his critics, and I think it was much easier to sustain a disagreement with him in print than in person. He was admirable in his willingness to speak up for what he believed on social and political issues. I have heard him described as "arrogant" but I do not think that is quite accurate. He could be overenthusiastic about an idea, and he became accustomed to being listened to by adulatory, unquestioning audiences, something few biologists have to learn to deal with. But he was not dogmatic, and could change his mind, even about details of his dearest idea, the hypothesis of punctuated equilibria. He never wavered, however, from a strong belief in its importance.

The reading public will miss Steve Gould's engaging style, and controversies in evolutionary biology will be much duller without him.

MARY JANE WEST-EBERHARD
*Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute,
Unit 2511, APO AA 34020-9511,
(Email, weberhar@racsa.co.cr)*