

FAREWELL, FOSSILFACE

A Memoir of Stephen Jay Gould (1941-2002)

R I C H A R D M I L N E R



Dino, right, and Fossilface,

“The so-called dead are still alive. Our friends are still with us. They guide and strengthen us when owing to absence of proper conditions they cannot make their presence known.”

— Alfred Russel Wallace (1823-1913)

I FIRST MET STEPHEN JAY GOULD when we were both twelve years old, and about to complete the sixth grade. My family had just moved to Bayside, Queens, a suburb of New York City, from my native Brooklyn. The term was winding down for the summer. Did anyone want to tell the class about their vacation plans or hobbies? Then, as now, I found the prospect of a captive audience irresistible and delivered an impromptu chalk talk on my childhood obsession: dinosaurs. Long-practiced sketches of tyrannosaurs, stegosaurus, and brontosaurus paraded across the blackboard as I expounded on each saurian—when it lived, how much it weighed, what it ate. Because the year was 1953, long before dinosauria exploded into popular culture, I thought I was the only kid in the school with a passion for dinosaurs and evolution. I was wrong.

A short, chubby, bright-eyed boy with a broad grin hung on my every word. He approached me, extending his hand in formal greeting. “I’m Steve Gould,” he said, “I like dinosaurs, too. I thought I was the only one in this school who did.” As we got to know each other over the next few weeks, we discovered other shared interests, including Alfred Hitchcock thrillers and the nineteenth-century musicals of Gilbert and Sullivan. When I went over to visit the Goulds, we hung out in the bedroom he shared with his younger brother, Peter. Before long, we had a literary disagreement about some Gilbert and Sullivan song. “Wait a minute,” he said, “I know I have that in my file.” Steve went into his closet and consulted a paper accordion-style file, from which he extracted the lyric in question. To this day, he remains the only 12-year-old I have ever seen who kept a filing system. (I have tried to emulate his organizational ability over the years, without notable success. Now that I’m an encyclopedist, I’m still trying.)

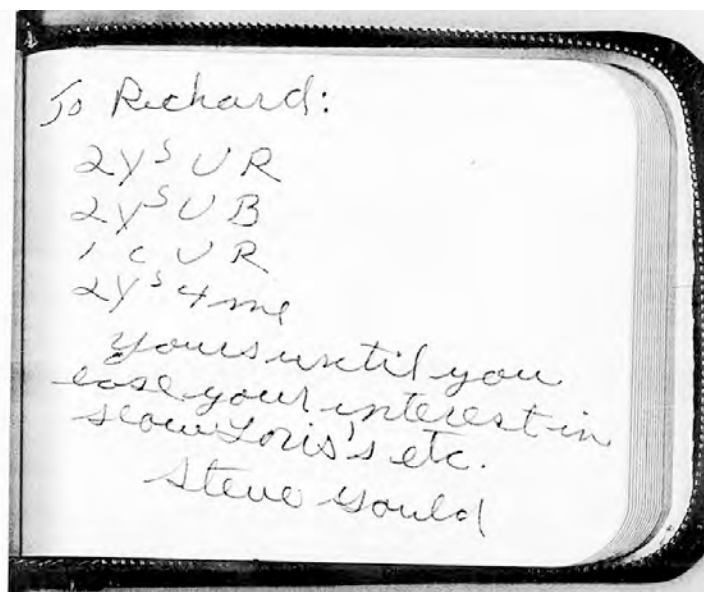
We continued as classmates at the local junior high, where our geeky interests inevitably resulted in schoolyard nicknames. I became known as “Dino,” which I liked, and Gould’s moniker was

“Fossilface,” which he hated but accepted with good humor.

One of our heroes was Charles Darwin, although Steve considered Joe DiMaggio a close second. What did the Sage of Down have in common with Joltin’ Joe? To Steve the similarities were obvious: excellence and grace. And the propensity to inspire those ideals in others. On weekends, when he wasn’t attending a Yankee’s baseball game with his father, Steve and I would take the bus and subway to Manhattan, to the American Museum of Natural History. There, while still a toddler, Steve had become “imprinted” on the immense *Tyrannosaurus rex* skeleton. It was mounted standing bolt upright on two gigantic legs, with the tail trailing behind on the ground—a posture since revised to that of a giant, bent-kneed chicken with a cantilevered tail. The great, towering carnosaur had fascinated and terrorized Steve when he was about five, had followed him home and into his dreams. Years before he ever knew the word, Steve decided to become a paleontologist.

I thought that I, too, would become some kind of scientist, or maybe a museum preparator. I learned how to do taxidermy, practicing on carcasses begged from the Bronx Zoo’s morgue, and entered my own exhibits in the school science fairs. Whenever we could, Steve and I continued to visit the American Museum of Natural History, enthralled by its world-class collection of dinosaurs, its dioramas of African animals, and the artistry that somehow shoehorned the entire world of life into a single building.

When I turned thirteen, Steve attended my bar mitzvah, the Jewish confirmation celebration. Steve brought me two presents: a set of tie tack and cuff links and a book—“*All About Dinosaurs*” by Roy Chapman Andrews. How I wish I still had that book, with Steve’s congratulatory inscription, but it got away from me over the years. However, I still do have the faux red leather zippered autograph book that we all signed for each other at junior high school graduation, with the page written by Steve. “2 Y^S UR/2 Y^S UB/ I c UR 2Y^S for me,” he wrote, “Yours until you lose your interest in slow loris’s, [sic] etc. Steve Gould.” Alas, we went off to separate high schools and different colleges and fell out of touch. He pursued paleontology and became an expert in the evolution of land snails, and I studied anthropology at the



Steve’s 6th grade contribution to my autograph book.

University of California. When I returned to New York some years later, with both my marriage and my academic career in tatters, I worked as a writer and editor for newsstand pulp magazines, which were light years away from my childhood interests and ambitions.

One day, in the late 1970s, I discovered that Steve had been writing an extraordinary monthly column in *Natural History*, the century-old magazine published at the American Museum of Natural History, and instantly became a fan. He was now a Harvard professor and popular author, whose talents, energies, and interests had taken him far beyond his narrow specialty of land snails. His essays ranged widely over evolutionary theory, the history of science, art, literature, and popular culture. The column’s title, “This View of Life,” refers to Darwin’s last sentence in the *Origin of Species*: “There is grandeur in this view of life...[that] from so simple a beginning endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful have been, and are being, evolved.”

Steve and I had not seen or spoken to each other for over twenty-five years. I wrote to him,



A Slow Loris—a nocturnal primate of the Southeast Asian rainforest.

"I wrote to him, 'You have inherited Thomas Huxley's mantle in explaining evolution to a new generation. Do you remember me?' He replied, 'Blood may be thicker than water, but junior high school friendships are thicker than anything.'"

"You have inherited Thomas Huxley's mantle in explaining evolution to a new generation. Do you remember me?" He replied, "Blood may be thicker than water, but junior high school friendships are thicker than *anything*." He invited me to have dinner with him the next time he visited New York to lecture at the Museum.

We met and instantly resumed our friendship just where we had left off. He reminded me of an exhibit I had made for our junior high school science fair—a series of shoebox dioramas depicting "Life Through the Ages." Along with the miniatures of prehistoric scenes, I had included an actual dinosaur bone, a tail vertebra the size of a steak. Thirteen-year-old Steve had been envious. "Where did you get that dino bone?" he asked. It was a gift from another of our childhood heroes, Dr. Edwin Colbert, curator of dinosaurs at the Museum. All those years ago, I had sent the scientist a handmade Easter card. When you opened it, a paper T. rex's mouth opened its jaws to reveal a greeting in its cardboard throat: "HAPPY EASTER DOCTOR COLBERT!" To my amazement, Colbert had invited me to the Museum, where he gave me a grand tour of the vertebrate paleontology department, and gifted me with a scrap of bone from a pile of fossil rubble.

At our reunion, Steve had a confession to make. "I never told you this," he said with that infectious grin, "but you inspired me. I made my own card, sent it to Dr. Colbert, he invited me up to the Museum—and he also gave *me* a dinosaur bone." That bone, and his baseball autographed by DiMaggio, became his two most prized possessions.

When Steve attended graduate school at Columbia University, Ned Colbert became one of his teachers, and Steve once asked him whether he remembered us and our hand-painted cards. Colbert replied that he had received hundreds of missives from school children over the years and couldn't recall. He had taken thousands of kids on the grand paleo tour. But when Colbert retired and was cleaning out his desk, he called Steve into his office. At the bottom of a drawerful of youngsters' correspondence, he had discovered our cards. We were special, but not any more special than the rest. To Ned Colbert, who died recently at 96, inspiring children was part of his job.

Now it was Steve who inspired me. He insist-

ed that I return to the fold and take up my boyhood interests once again. But where to begin, with no credentials and no umbrella institution? He urged me to pursue the history of science as an independent scholar, to make a pilgrimage to Darwin's home in England, and to buy antiquarian natural history books in the shops around the British Museum. He gave me letters of introduction to librarians and top scholars. I followed his advice and, little by little, I found my way back to the world of research.

In 1982, at age forty, Steve was stricken with abdominal mesothelioma, a rare and "invariably fatal" form of cancer. I went to visit him at Harvard during this period, when many of his colleagues regarded him as doomed and avoided him. He had shrunk to a skeletal ninety pounds, lost his hair, and had to excuse himself every so often to throw up. Nevertheless, he insisted on leading me on a brisk, three-hour walking tour of the campus. We mounted and descended every staircase, and explored every nook and cranny of "his" natural history enclave, the Agassiz Museum. Steve was not ready to leave us. He continued to publish scientific papers during his illness and never missed a month of his column in the magazine. Against great odds, and thanks to a new experimental chemotherapy combined with his fighting spirit, the cancer retreated and seemed to disappear. During the ensuing grace period of twenty years, he accomplished more than most professionals do in a lifetime.

By the mid-1980s, I managed to unearth a few interesting incidents that had almost been lost to history. One was the story of an 1876 courtroom trial that took place in London: the prosecution of Spiritualist grifter Henry Slade, who summoned departed spirits to answer his client's questions—in writing. As the judge put it, he was running "sort of a post office between this world and the next." (Nowadays, we put such "common rogues," as Darwin called them, on national television with their own shows.) Darwin and Alfred Russel Wallace, the two most brilliant naturalists of the nineteenth century, had taken opposite sides when the supernatural went on trial. Gould was delighted when *Scientific American* published my findings in 1996. "I would never have dreamed," he wrote to them, "that an independent scholar could make fresh discoveries in a field so thoroughly raked over."

Steve also encouraged me to write my

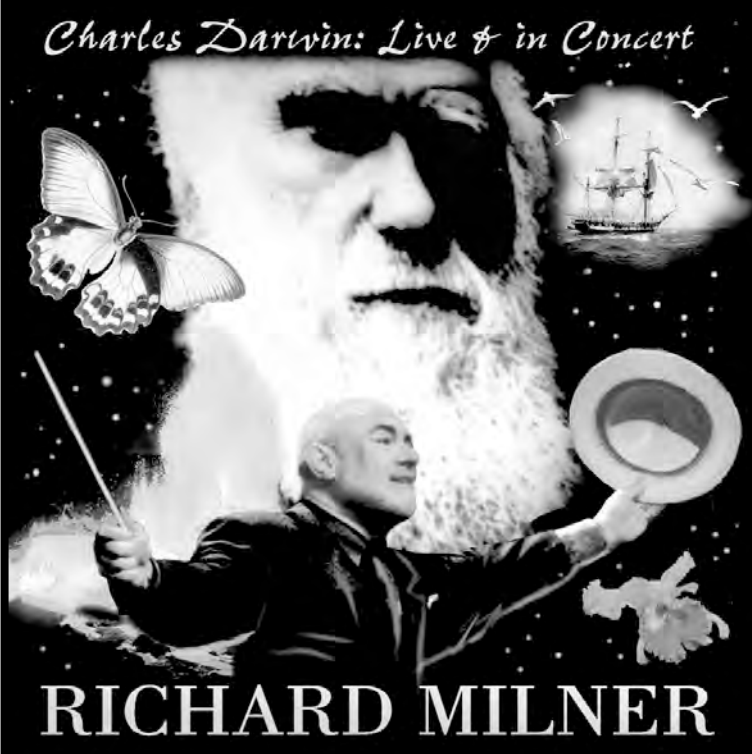
Encyclopedia of Evolution, to which he generously contributed a foreword. Soon after the first edition was published, and at his urging, in 1990 I was hired as a senior editor by *Natural History* magazine. A few years later, I was assigned to see Steve's column through to press each month. One did not really edit Stephen Jay Gould. You made a hundred suggestions for possible changes, he accepted three, and that was the end of it. Mostly my job was to check for errors (there were mighty few), to help find suitable pictures, and to frame the essay with suitable quotes and captions.

After writing some 300 columns, one a month for twenty-five years, Steve retired from *Natural History* in the year 2000. It had always been his plan to write them until the new millennium. In addition to his teaching, he had other mollusks to fry: A massive 1400-page tome on *The Structure of Evolutionary Theory*, which appeared shortly before his death, and two planned books on patterns in evolution and a history of paleontology from the sixteenth through the eighteenth centuries. The last two, unfortunately, were never given to the world. He said they would require another twenty years.

When Steve retired from writing his column, the Skeptics Society in California held an all-day Festschrift celebration at Caltech, featuring speakers who had been inspired by his work. Steve himself spoke (impromptu and brilliantly, for nearly two hours) and I was asked to write and perform a Gilbert and Sullivan-style lyric for the occasion. I chose "My Name is John Wellington Wells (I'm a Dealer in Magic and Spells)" from *The Sorcerer*, to which Steve had introduced me when we were youngsters. With homage to W.S. Gilbert, the lyric appears on the next page.

The second time I performed that song in public was also the last time I saw Steve. It was at a meeting of the American Institute of Biological Sciences in Arlington, Virginia, held in March, 2002. Steve was receiving their Distinguished Scientist award and I was to perform my show, "Charles Darwin: Live & In Concert," immediately afterward. We had been looking forward to appearing together, but I had learned of his diagnosis about two weeks before. Another, even more virulent form of cancer had attacked his brain, liver, and lungs. For the first time, I saw intimations of despair beneath the

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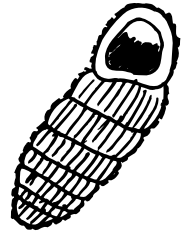
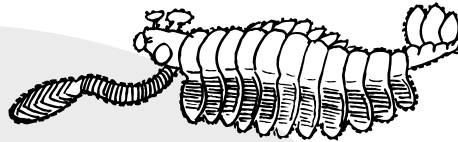
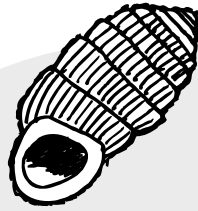
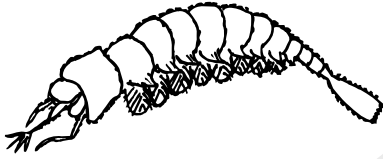
"Sheer magic...intelligent and funny!"
—Penn Jillette, *illusionist and performer*

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— *Wall Street Journal*

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STEPHEN JAY GOULD IS MY NAME

Based on Gilbert & Sullivan's "My Name is John Wellington Wells"
from *The Sorcerer* © 2001 R. Milner

*Oh! Stephen Jay Gould is my name
And fossils and shells are my game
Canadian shales
And Bahamian snails
Have brought me a measure of fame.*

*If Darwin is your cup of tea
But you don't have a lot of time free
You don't have to look
Through his wearisome book
You can learn evolution from me.*

*I can tell you a tale of a trial
Where Bryan and Darrow once tangled
A courtroom so laden with bile
That truth got distorted and mangled.
Fundamentalists shouted defiance,
"Darwinian textbooks must go,
The Bible contains all the science
A biology class needs to know!"*

*I write of cladistics
And baseball statistics
From dodos and mandrills
To friezes and spandrels
With answers provisional
Branches divisional
Watching them practically
Bifurcate fractally, bifurcate fractally*

*I write
Essays thematical
Always grammatical
Asteroids, sesamoids,
Pestilence tragical
Ratites, stalactites
And home runs DiMaggical*

*Oh!
If my essays anyone lacks
I've got the back issues in stacks
You can get them from me
For a nominal fee
Just drop me a line or a fax!*

*I can find
no cosmic mind behind*

*Life's eternal mystery
If an ape
replayed the tape
He'd see only contingent history.
A plan
to make a man
Was not evolution's objective
To believe all the fuss
was all about us
Is an anthropocentric perspective!*

*I write of
Cranial capacity
Owen's mendacity
Huxley's audacity
Galton's urbanity
FitzRoy's insanity
How Ernst Haeckel, without an apology
Faked illustrations about embryology*

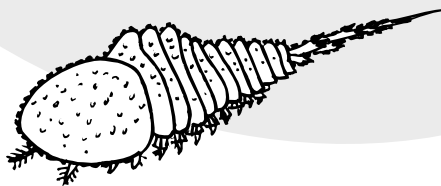
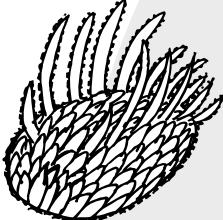
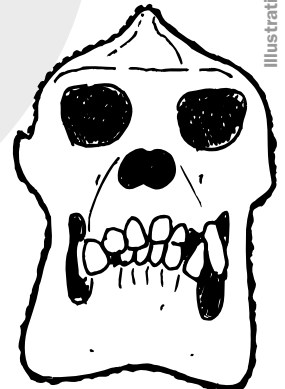
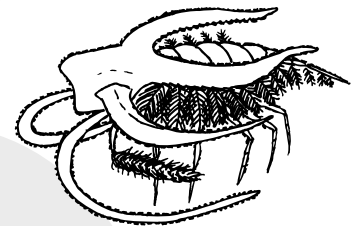
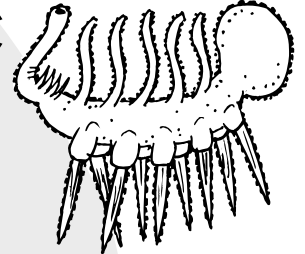
*Marsh's collecting
Butler's objecting
Paley's theology
And teleology
Cope's osteology
And eschatology*

*But I admit to a preference
For Wallace's deference—
for Alfred Wallace's deference!*

*Yes!
My name is Stephen Jay Gould
In science I'm very well schooled
So beware adaptationists!
Look out, Creationists!
I am not easily fooled.*

*If my essays anyone lacks
I've got those back issues in stacks
You can get them from me
For a nominal fee
If you drop me a line or a fax.*

*(spoken:) Please allow
six to eight weeks for delivery.*



exuberant, cheerful manner—but the audience had no clue that Steve was dying.

He insisted on personally introducing me to the assembled scientists, and greeted me with a public hug and a kiss on the cheek. During the performance, I saw him sitting in the front row, smiling, staring up at me with the same attention and delight I remembered him showing the very first time we met, after my prepubescent dinosaur lecture. When I came off the stage, he said “Fabulous performance! I see you finally learned the words to my song.” We had a wonderful time together, although (and because) we both knew there were not many ticks left in the clock.

A few weeks later, Steve had surgery to remove the brain tumor. Days afterward, he returned to his teaching chores, lecturing as many as five hours a day, and finishing out the Harvard semester. I spoke with him by phone during that time, and diffidently asked him a favor, for which I apologized. “No need to act any differently,” he replied. “I know only one way to live—flat out, one day at a time. I’ll be happy to do it.”

The following week he collapsed, was hospitalized, and died a few weeks later in the



Gould in his library. Photo by Michael Shermer



antiquarian library of his lavish New York loft apartment, surrounded by the wonderful collection of rare natural history books he loved.

I am in my own library now, and before me is a volume of Steve’s essays, *The Lying Stones of Marrakech*. He wrote on the title page, “To Dino, from Fossilface. Honoring a lifetime of shared interests. Stephen Jay Gould.”

Hail and farewell, Fossilface. You enriched my life and personified the grace and excellence of your childhood heroes. Your friendship was an honor, and a privilege—and an inspiration. □

A theorist of evolution faces off with one of the glorious products of evolution. Photo by Delta Willis