
An Interview with Stephen Jay Gould

Joltin' Joe and the Pursuit of Excellence

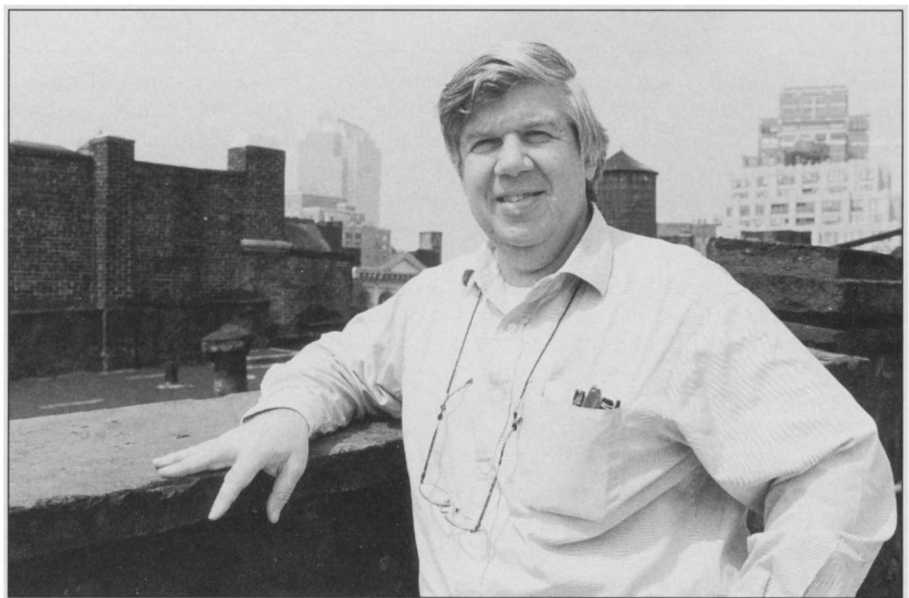
BY MARK F. GOLDBERG

Award-winning author Stephen Jay Gould shares some of his personal history as well as his views on education and contemporary American culture.

STRICTLY speaking, Stephen Jay Gould is not an educator. He's a paleontologist, Harvard professor, and arguably America's finest and most commercially successful serious science writer. He does not profess to know what is laudable or lamentable about the public schools, since his career in education has been devoted to highly motivated graduate students and undergraduates. Indeed, he describes Harvard as "a school of valedictorians — highly skilled and pretty well motivated" and hardly an accurate microcosm of America's youth. However, Gould does have very strong feelings about what he valued in his own education and what he values in the educational world he knows — not to mention what he misses in today's students and in American culture.

I interviewed Professor Gould in his modern, beautifully renovated, spacious New York loft, which is filled with his art-

MARK F. GOLDBERG retired in 1994 as a public school administrator and is now an education writer and consultant who lives in East Setauket, N.Y.



ist wife's colorful and fascinating finished works and works-in-progress, built-in storage cabinets and bookcases, lots of books, comfortable furniture, and the old typewriter on which he still prefers to write. Dressed informally and without shoes, Gould graciously invited me into his office and answered all my specific questions, save those related to his immediate family. Not willing to react to a general question, Gould punctuated our interview with the courteous and gently spoken admonition "Be more specific."

The holder of more than two dozen honorary degrees; a charter recipient (1981) of a MacArthur Foundation Prize Fellowship (a "genius award," as they have come to be known); the winner of numerous literary, scholarly, and scientific awards; and the author of 15 books, Gould was pleased to begin the interview with remarks about his own early education. But he cautioned,

"I spent more time playing stickball in the street than I ever did reading when I was a kid."

Stephen Jay Gould is a product of New York City's public schools in their golden age from the late 1940s to about 1960 — the days when the system was filled with "older teachers who had gotten their jobs in the Thirties, in the Depression, many of them overqualified, some of them even Ph.D.s." His second book of essays, *The Panda's Thumb*, is dedicated to three of his best elementary school teachers, one of whom — Esther Ponti, his fifth-grade teacher — Gould corresponded with "until she died a few years ago." Looking back, Gould says he appreciated Ponti's dedication, toughness, imagination, and especially her willingness to accommodate youngsters with a developing passion for science. "She didn't know much science, and there was little science in the curriculum then.

When she realized many of us were interested in science, she would set aside a time each week for us to sit in the back of the room and talk about science. She'd provide materials and books."

When Gould recalls his finest public

each day, making it impossible for them to read long essays, "but at Antioch we wrote for every single course, even physics courses. It was just understood that writing was essential." After graduation, Gould knew he had to go to Columbia

Gould's writing is stylistically glorious, but his essays assume a reader's willingness to engage seriously with demanding ideas.

school teachers, he talks frequently of their dedication to students and their unwavering adherence to high standards. Ted Weinkranz, a history teacher, was a "compassionate man, a committed intellectual." Jean Gollobin, a choral teacher, was "an extraordinarily committed human being who believed in excellence." Again and again, Gould refers to compassion and rigor as the twin characteristics of those teachers he recollects with greatest fondness. His descriptions of his parents are similar. He refers to his mother as a "brave woman and a wise owl" (dedication to *Hen's Teeth and Horse's Toes*) whose devotion to family touched her son; his father, a man of no great education, was nevertheless "an autodidact, a very learned man."

High excellence is the centerpiece of Gould's most enthusiastic memory of public school. "My greatest high school experience was singing in the all-city high school chorus. Peter Wilhousky would get together 250 kids from all over the city, the most motley mixture you ever saw — Italian kids from Staten Island, Puerto Rican kids from Manhattan, black kids from Harlem, all of whom liked to sing — and somehow welded us into an almost professional group. We sang once a year in Carnegie Hall."

After high school, Gould found himself at Antioch College, in Yellow Springs, Ohio. It was a new and welcome experience for a New York City boy. "It was a great pleasure to be in a place where the class size was never more than 30 and often fewer than 10," he reminisces. Antioch was also a place dedicated to writing. In high school, Gould recalls, classes were big, and teachers had five or six classes

University, so he could study paleontology at the American Museum of Natural History. In those days, the museum "had ties" to Columbia. From age 5, he knew that he wanted to be a paleontologist. "Virtually any paleontologist who grew up in New York City will tell you the same story about going to the Museum of Natural History and loving the dinosaurs." Gould received his Ph.D. in 1967, four years out of Antioch, and landed a job at Harvard as an assistant professor.

Gould's spectacular career in science writing began rather modestly. "I got a call from Alan Ternes in 1973, the editor of *Natural History* magazine, and he asked me if I'd write a few columns." At the time, Gould didn't even know that the magazine had regular columns. For the first 10 years of his professional career, he had written basically "technical scientific papers, but I wrote them in an oddly literate style because it seemed the right way to me. Developing a career in more general writing was never an explicit intention." But it is something that just grew and grew. Now, 260 essays later, seven of Gould's books are collections of his best essays. *The Panda's Thumb* won a National Book Award in 1981; the original version of *The Mismeasure of Man* won the National Book Critics Circle Award in 1982; *Wonderful Life* was nominated and became a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize in 1991 and was honored by Phi Beta Kappa and Rhone-Poulenc in Britain as the best science book of the year. All of Gould's 15 books have sold well among serious readers. His writing is stylistically glorious, but his essays assume a reader's willingness to engage seriously with demanding ideas.

The book that comes closest to being an "education" book is, of course, *The Mismeasure of Man* (1981), in which Gould rejects "the idea that there's an effectively immutable, single factorial general intelligence." The book was reissued in 1996 in a revised and expanded edition, which serves as a highly informed refutation of *The Bell Curve* (1994), by Richard Herrnstein and Charles Murray, a work that favors the unitary interpretation of intelligence. Gould is absolutely certain that *The Bell Curve* is more about politics than science. "When the political pendulum shifts to the right, all these marginal viewpoints become momentarily respectable again. There's always a Murray and a Herrnstein. To get as much notice as it did, it had to strike a political chord, and its publication came just with the transition to the Gingrich Congress. . . . If you want to cut governmental spending, you're going to go with the argument that these people can't be helped because they're made that way," he says. Gould is particularly rankled by Murray's pretension to be a disinterested scholar when everyone knows he's a "conservative ideologue who's been in the employ of right-wing think tanks for 20 years." There is no real intellectual debate here, he argues, any more than there is for creationism. But these issues surface every time they become politically useful. Despite his long record of doing so, Gould does not believe that reacting against marginal theories is the best way for a scholar to spend his time, "but you can't just let [such theories] sit. It's frustrating."

Modern culture is also frustrating to Gould. While both graduate and undergraduate students at Harvard are extremely bright and motivated, they have no shared culture, which makes every form of teaching more difficult. "There really isn't any centerpiece of knowledge you can assume people to have. Even a generation ago, you could assume that the most common Shakespearean and Biblical quotations would be recognized by most students — but you just can't anymore." Gould is not convinced that there ever was a golden age for broad cultural knowledge, but he misses the relatively narrow, yet dependable culture that the generations shared until very recently.

Contemporary culture is filled with "sound bites, simplification, and short takes. In politics you can't discuss anything of substance," he charges. Gould is genuinely concerned about how people use

what is available through on-line computer services. The paradox is that anything you want is just a few keystrokes away, but “what you get is a pretty picture, a paragraph, a song, and directions for how to dig deeper, which most people are disinclined to do.” A large majority of Harvard students are ignorant of any historical perspective, cannot read in a foreign language, and, worst of all, will not look deeply into references “because they’re not used to doing that,” Gould says. He tells of a student who speculated about the origin of the word “real” but had no idea that “there was an etymological section in the dictionary” that would have yielded the information she wanted. Even the brightest and most motivated students in the land are a reflection of a culture that has no apparent center and no driving impulse toward thorough scholarship.

Gould has general opinions on what constitutes good public education, but he argues that his views are neither “deep nor distinctive.” He favors small classes, a rigorous curriculum, and some common body of knowledge that includes basic grammar,

arithmetic, Shakespeare, and the Bible as literature. He’s opposed to teaching values in the school, other than such basic standards as golden-rule behavior, antiracism, and antisexism. Indeed, he hopes for a world in which “the fact that a child has black skin is no more consequential than having black or brown hair.” In his own teaching, and particularly with graduate students, he tries to “nurture and foster an intellectual environment. . . . You have to project the importance of intellectual values and integrity, and do it by example.”

It is when he talks about excellence that great passion infuses his voice. “I have strong feelings about intellectual integrity, doing things for yourself, not accepting what you’re told, reading as much as you can in original sources, in original languages if you need to. Otherwise, you’re just recycling what was given to you.” His intellectual heroes are such towering scholars as Peter Medawar and Isaiah Berlin, to whom he dedicated *An Urchin in a Storm*. These men seemed to know everything, had great expertise in their chosen fields, and were absolutely dedicated to the highest

ideals of scholarship. Both were polymaths and great models for young scholars. However, it is not academic work that draws Gould’s highest praise, but excellence — high excellence in any responsible work, including scholarship. And Gould is well aware of the “rarity of the pursuit of excellence.”

Watching people perform at the pinnacle of excellence in “anything” — be it opera, athletics, or scholarship — is what Gould most enjoys. Any reader of Stephen Jay Gould knows that baseball occupies a special place in his heart. Watching Ted Williams at bat years ago or Wade Boggs today is a great thrill for Professor Gould. But it is the Yankee Clipper who sets the gold standard for what constitutes the pursuit of excellence. “My boyhood hero was Joe DiMaggio more than anyone else. I met him once; he’s a man of little talk but enormous action. His excellence was on a baseball field, and he was gracious and elegant. He was an artist at bat, and he didn’t make compromises in the field,” Gould says. *Mutatis mutandis*, he could be describing himself. **K**



PHI DELTA KAPPA'S

Curriculum Management Audit Training

Training in the curriculum audit process empowers you to look objectively at the entire curriculum management system and to make the best decisions for all students based on what you find.

DATE	SITE	TIME
February 10-14, 1997	Orlando, Florida	Monday through Friday 8:30 a.m. to 5:00 p.m.
February 17-21, 1997	Seattle, Washington	
March 10-14, 1997	San Francisco, California	
April 14-18, 1997	Columbus, Ohio	
May 5-9, 1997	Chicago, Illinois	

PROGRAM FEE: \$1,095 per person. Includes instruction, materials, continental breakfast, break refreshments, and lunch. Team rates do not apply.

REGISTRATION DEADLINE: The registration deadline is two weeks prior to the training date. Advanced registration is required and will be limited.

For a complete brochure or to register for training, contact: **PHI DELTA KAPPA INTERNATIONAL**
Center for Professional Development & Services • P. O. Box 789 • Bloomington, IN 47402-0789
E-MAIL: cpds@pdkintl.org • PHONE: 812/339-1156 or 800/766-1156 or FAX: 812/339-0018