

Editorial

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Everyone has embarrassing tales to hide. One of my most embarrassing stories is that I missed a lecture by Stephen Jay Gould in New Delhi when I was a physics undergraduate student. My knowledge of biology was (and still is) abysmal and I didn't care much about evolution. That indifference vanished soon though. I don't remember exactly how I got addicted to Gould's column in 'Natural History', but soon I found myself keeping an eye for the new issues in the library shelf.



Those marvellous essays offered tantalizing glimpses of the great debate among the evolutionists. Gould desisted thinking of evolution as some sort of progression, and often offered instances which showed the importance of historical and structural constraints. (Vagaries of history show up in the most unexpected of places. Things often cannot be perfectly planned, otherwise you wouldn't be reading an editorial for an issue on Gould written by an astrophysicist who can only come up with imperfect analogies. It so happened that as the idea for an issue on Gould evolved, the baton for writing the editorial was passed on to me by the last editorial writer, a biologist – constraints from our structure of a six months' stint for an editorial writer – whose name was printed once even after his term was over, by mistake of course, but offering an instance of vestiges from history.) What made those essays exquisite, are the gems that he collected from literature, humanities, and other branches of science, marshalling support from all quarters. He was also a great teacher – his basic course on the history of life in Harvard was famous for drawing more crowd than the classroom could manage (do have a look at <http://www.courses.fas.harvard.edu/~scib16>; perhaps you can even try one of the term papers posted there).

Many biologists probably prefer to think him as wrong, but even the most bitter critics admitted that it was Gould who always provided the impetus to the debate on evolution, by continuing to ask controversial questions. And Gould is a hero in this sense. A successful scientific discipline cannot and should not be measured by the degree of agreement among its members, but the variety of questions that the discipline encourages to ask.

Apart from articles on biology, we also have articles on great experiments in particle physics, the recent exciting discovery of an algorithm to test the prime nature of a number, among others. I am sure if 'Resonance' existed when I was a physics undergraduate student, I would have surely peeked at the chemistry or biology articles, and would never have missed a lecture by Gould.