



## INTO FOCUS

### THE BEGINNING AND THE PSEUDO-END

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The editors of PE have asked me to write more editorials. I stopped doing that a while ago not because I was exhausted or ran out of topics, but because I was thinking a lot about retirement. I was perplexed about it, now that it was just a few years away. I wanted to clear the decks, so to speak, so that I could get on with “retirement” whenever it came, so I divested myself of obligations.

This editorial assignment started in the early 1990’s with Norm MacLeod’s PaleoNet. Norm set this up more or less by himself, but he asked me if the Museum of Paleontology at Berkeley would host it on our computers. I thought that was a good idea and we developed a partnership, discussing it by email. Part of that was to ensure the success of PaleoNet by generating discussions of interest to paleontologists, at least initially. Norm suggested that we do that, and so I did, chiefly as I drank coffee on breaks, about various topics I thought of or as responses to others’ comments. Some of the posts were long, some very short. I knew I had overdone it, however, when, at a meeting in Europe, an Italian paleontologist I just met, said “Oh, Mr. PaleoNet”. That worried me a good deal. Although I was having fun with it, perhaps I should slow down, I thought.

Just about that time, Norm approached me by email about a new project—this journal. We more or less agreed that it would be a good thing. A bit later, Norm asked me to write editorials for the new electronic journal, and I asked him what he wanted.

Oh, more of the sort of thing you write about on PaleoNet. Well, that was not so helpful since I had commented on about every topic in paleo, but I agreed to help him nevertheless.

I thought long and hard about a name for my as yet undefined editorial column. The good phrases were taken, like Darwin’s “This View of Life” which had been used several times for books and columns, so I did not want to repeat those. In the end, I decided to label each editorial with its own title, but Norm came up with an overall title. The editorial turned out to be commentary on various things going on or affecting the paleontological community, sometimes more locally, sometimes more generally. I did not particularly want to discuss technical questions. Steve Gould already had a corner on that and I was not inclined to deal with that kind of material anyway. Steve had a set standard—an introduction that was not especially related to the main topic and lots of big words. He once said he did not know if it worked or not, but it was the way he wrote. Successful it was, and you could see the big words he used turn up in scientific papers a few months after he used them in his column. That was not my style at all, and *Palaeontologia Electronica* was a big experiment anyway. I’d do it my way and see what happened.

My editorials spanned a wide variety of topics from paleontologists’ behavior, to the words we used, through the interactions with the public, both good and bad, that we had. Sometimes paleontologists or others got upset, sometimes they agreed

with me. Sometimes they would write comments that were posted in the journal, other times they sent me emails directly. Usually those were from creationists trying to convert me, or so I thought. I enjoyed writing the editorials, but after eight years, I thought I had lived up to Norm's expectation. Besides, I was anticipating retirement, and although we have no age limit in the U.S. at which we must retire, I was still thinking about what the options were. In order to do that, I decided to clear my obligations because I did have some models in mind. So I stopped.

Early in my life, I had met Loye Holmes Miller, an avian paleontologist at my Alma Mater, UCLA. He was 87 then, and I was a mere undergraduate. I had a question for him though. My advisor in the Geology Department told me that it was a useless major because no jobs were available, and that I should find a better major than Geology. Up to that point in my life, I had only wanted to be a paleontologist, like many kids, and a geologist. The advisor's words came like a rock hammer blow to me. I was crushed. That's when I went to see Loye Miller, or "Padre" as everyone there called him. His advice, based on his own long life, was to forget what that guy had said, and go for what made me happy. That's what he did, but, as he told me, 10 or so years late. He had taken his parents' advice and majored in a topic they suggested, and then he struggled for a decade to get back to his original love, birds and fossils. He said, "Don't listen to that that guy, just do what you love. It will work out". I did and I never looked back except to think what I owed Padre. His life at that time seemed like a good model for retirement. He sat under the stair case in the Zoology Department at UCLA for a good many years, just talking to students, studying bird fossils and writing papers. He lived quite happily until he was about 100. I thought I'd like to retire like him. I liked him and his life after retirement.

Theodosius Dobzhansky retired from New York to the University of California, Davis, where I had my first job and was most fortunate to meet him. He and some others came to dinner one night, and he described his busy life in NY and his life in Davis. In Davis, he sat in his office, gladly provided to him by the Department, writing papers. When a student came by, he laid his pencil down, talked for minutes or hours, then picked up his pencil and started again exactly where he left off. Doby was a good model too, and he had been an exceptionally outstanding scientist already and was still going strong. Clearly, he was having a good time doing

more or less what he had always done so successfully—studying his discipline, and writing papers and books.

Later, George Gaylord Simpson, retired in Arizona, came to lecture in the Geology Department at Davis. He had a different approach to retirement—travel. After his lecture, he told me about an upcoming trip he was making to Antarctica on a tourist ship. Since he had written a book about penguins, he was anxious to see them in action. We set up a rendezvous on the Antarctic Peninsula where he and I would be at the same time in just a few months. He was excited to see everything and obviously enjoyed the entire experience. You could see through his quiet disposition a real admiration for nature. A year later, my wife and I were in Tucson, Arizona, where he lived, and I said to her, "I should call Simpson". She, of course, told me to go ahead, even though I was very reluctant to disturb him but she insisted. When he answered and I said I was in town, he replied, "Come on over" and gave me the address. He showed me his library and office in his converted garage, where he continued to do science. His desk, opposite his National Medal of Science presented by the President of the US and set in a stand on top of an ordinary file cabinet, was littered with his work. Obviously, he enjoyed his freedom to travel and to write as he pleased. He told me it was a good life, and I made a mental note of that.

At Berkeley, J. Wyatt Durham had been long retired when I joined the faculty there. He came in to the department every day, and we chatted in the hallways and he showed me fossils on occasion. Once he called me into his office to discuss a manuscript that had been rejected from a journal. It concerned *Helicoplacoids* and he didn't know what to do with it. I suggested that he take the reviewers comments seriously, change those passages, and send it into the *Journal of Paleontology*. In his 80s, he did just that, and won the Best Paper Award in the *Journal* for that year, and also received the Paleontological Society medal. He was absolutely thrilled and carried that medal in his coat pocket, probably until the day he died, so he could show it to everyone he met. He gave lectures and talked to students and faculty in the small office that the department provided until one day he came no more. Although he struggled with his imminent passing, he still enjoyed talking about fossils and collecting them in the field, as far away as Alaska.

My long-time friend and colleague, Jim Valentine retired from the Berkeley faculty years ago under an early retirement program. He came into

my office (I was Chair at the time) and said he was sorry to do this to me, but he was going to accept the retirement package. He could not afford to do otherwise. I was afraid for a few minutes that we might lose Jim from the department. He asked for an office, which we gave him, and he set about continuing his academic life, as though nothing had changed except for teaching. He still interacted with graduate students, received grants, and wrote papers and books. He told me last year that he was busier now than he had ever been. But it was a new kind of busyness devoid of the annoyances that university administrations impose on regular faculty. Instead, he did much as he did before he

retired and was free to pursue it in any way he wanted. It looks like a very good life to me.

Now that it is my turn to consider retirement, I think of all these people who continued their scientific lives, and others who disappeared from the paleontological scene. I admire those who have stayed connected with paleontology, for they have continued a way of life they always loved and enjoyed. So I will write some more editorials for PE, because I think I want to continue my life style, too. Retirement, I hope, will be more of the same, more joy in the field, more fun writing, and more good interactions with young students and older colleagues. I look forward to it.