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I never enrolled in one of his courses. But as a new graduate student in the Department of Zoology at the University of Michigan in September 1963, I had four months to prepare for a three-day-long preliminary examination, ranging from biochemistry to ecology and systematics, that would determine whether or not I was to continue in the Ph. D. program. My course schedule was filled with embryology and other subjects I had had no acquaintance with. But older students advised that the ecology questions would bear no resemblance to anything I had ever learned in my undergraduate ecology course. So I snuck into the back row of a long, packed lecture room to listen to Lawrence Slobodkin, whose idea of ecology, I was told, was growing *Daphnia* in small bottles. Before long, I learned that this man's ecology was even weirder than that: it was full of incomprehensible diagrams labeled with *K*'s and alphas that sometimes even threatened to leap out of the blackboard. A month on, at the department's annual picnic, I finally approached him, and discovered that I wasn't the anonymous, inconspicuous face in the crowd that I had supposed I was. "Who gave you permission to sit in on my course?" was not the most promising beginning of a relationship that changed my life. But no one has taught me more.

At that point in my life, my only claim to self-confidence was my knowledge of natural history; I was a fairly accomplished birder and had taken almost every organism-centered course Cornell offered. I was almost pathologically shy; my perspective was that of my blue-collar family in the provincial Bronx; although I had attended an elite high school in Manhattan, where a classical education planted seeds that would grow much later, my intellectual horizons had broadened only so far as to enjoy Beethoven and Mozart. At Cornell, my most influential teachers (William L. Brown, Charles Sibley, and Bruce Wallace) inspired a growing interest in evolution, but I retained and nurtured a boyhood interest in amphibians and reptiles, and went to Michigan to be trained as a herpetologist.

Other Michigan graduate students had devised interesting evolutionary studies of herps, but my desire to do so was not matched by creativity. And it must be said that some loci within the Department and the Museum were more dynamic and exciting than others. Among these, the weekly ecology lunch seminar, organized by Nelson Hairston, Sr., Fred Smith, Francis Evans, and Slobodkin, was preeminent (as the roster of ecologists who emerged from that setting during the '60's bears witness). The focus was invariably on conceptual problems, and no one was more exclusively focused on conceptual and theoretical questions – "big" questions – than Slobodkin. (I am just one among a generation of students who absorbed this approach to ecology from his small, clear, highly influential book, *Growth and Regulation of Animal Populations*.) At Cornell, I had learned from Bill Brown that biology is most exciting and rewarding when biologists disagree, and the Michigan ecology lunch was the realization of this principle. I don't recall many of Slobodkin's comments – just that he looked at the familiar in the most unfamiliar ways. Sometimes he helped us to new insights; at times his ideas seemed (or were) off the wall; but what mattered was the trying. Could there be prudent predators? Might there be a canonical value of ecological efficiency? Could the notion of evolutionary strategy explain the latitudinal gradient in species diversity? Just to pose such questions was a lesson in intellectual daring and creativity.

It was his presentation on latitudinal diversity gradients that awoke me. I suppose I must have thought I was an expert on the subject because I had taken one of the first OTS courses in tropical ecology a year earlier, and I told him that I didn't think his hypothesis was likely. He invited me (if I may be euphemistic) to lead the discussion the following week and explain my thinking on the topic. I did, and in doing so came up with a quite logical (but quantitatively absurd)

alternative hypothesis. Slobodkin had done one of the best things a teacher can do: challenge a student to think, to dare (like himself) to be original, even at risk of being wrong.

Soon afterward, he accepted me as his graduate student. I was now determined to address a “big” question and, moreover, to synthesize ecology and evolutionary processes, the two areas in which I was most interested. Indeed, among the faculty at Michigan, Slobodkin was the one person who came closest to such synthesis: I was impressed that his perspective on ecology was so informed by evolution, and that he was familiar with the works of Dobzhansky, I. M. Lerner, and other evolutionary geneticists. This was the time, of course, when “population biology,” a hoped-for synthesis of population genetics and ecology, was being formed by MacArthur, Lewontin, Wilson, Slobodkin, and others. But the theory being fermented was matched by so few empirical studies of ecology-cum-evolutionary genetics that an only slightly imaginative student could hope to make a contribution. Slobodkin did not press possible topics on me, nor I think did he with other students; he allowed freedom to succeed or not, but likewise to be the author of one’s own modest success. He did provide encouragement, emotional support, and open access, and in my case he arranged, in an impromptu telephone call, for me to deepen my education in population genetics by spending a seminally important summer in Dick Lewontin’s lab. My dissertation topic, on experimental evolution of competition between two species of *Drosophila* (Futuyma 1970), was triggered by some of Lewontin’s comments, but it was just the kind of evolutionary approach to an ecological principle that Slobodkin could enthusiastically support. The ecological framework of this study was taken intact from *Growth and Regulation of Animal Populations*, and I think I had also learned from Slobodkin the DeWit replacement series method of analyzing competition. Most important, though, were the independence, support, and occasional advice (too seldom requested) he provided during those years – and much more besides, to which I will later return.

In 1968, shortly before I received my Ph.D., Slobodkin accepted a position as chair of a department, yet to be formed, at an almost unheard-of new university at Stony Brook on Long Island. The resident biologists (including George Williams) took the almost unprecedented* [* The precedent was at the University of California at Irvine] step of erecting separate biology departments corresponding to levels of biological organization (rather than zoology and botany), and Slobodkin was to lead the new Department of Ecology. His approach to almost instantaneous formation of a faculty was to attract some highly visible senior biologists (Robert Sokal [who pressed to expand the department’s name to include evolution] and James Rohlf) and a slew of potentially promising young Ph.D.’s, drawing especially on those he knew at Michigan. Among these, he succeeded in attracting John Vandermeer, J. Steven Farris, and me. Vandermeer was attracted back to Michigan within two years, Farris made life in the department increasingly uncomfortable until he left in 1992, and “only I am left to tell the tale.”

I think there is general agreement that for much of its history, the E&E department at Stony Brook has played a significant role in academic ecology and (perhaps especially) evolutionary biology, chiefly by graduating students who now are prominent members of the field. There is no question in my mind that most of the credit for this achievement must be granted to Slobodkin and Sokal, whose very different contributions shaped the department from its beginning. In many ways, the early department reflected Slobodkin’s personality. The criterion of excellence and performance was dedication to intellectual achievement and to conceptually significant research. Faculty were hired less in order to fill predefined disciplinary slots than to make significant contributions in research, in what may well have been viewed as an idiosyncratic array of subject areas. No border between ecology and evolutionary biology was recognized; a substantial fraction of the faculty could claim to be evolutionary ecologists or ecological evolutionists. Graduate students were to be

broadly trained across these fields (an E&E version of the dreaded Michigan preliminary exam was imported along with the young faculty who had survived it), even if the breadth of training and perspective cost students some time before they began dissertation research. Many faculty members encouraged their students to identify and execute their research independently, rather than adopting part of their advisor's research program for their dissertation. In many ways, the department was "inefficient," in terms of composing a faculty, assigning teaching responsibilities, or moving students quickly through to their Ph.D., but "inefficiency" can be a pessimist's or a bureaucrat's name for freedom. I have little doubt that many who were students or faculty in the early department would recall the atmosphere as one of intellectual freedom and exploration. There is probably no respect in which Slobodkin can be called efficient — surely not in his administrative role — but at his best he radiated intellectual freedom, even playfulness, that set the tone. And there is another way in which he put his stamp on the department: as a Jew, as one who knew what it was like to feel alien, as one who with his wife Tamara had been active in the civil rights movement, Slobodkin made it clear, subtly but unmistakably, that this was a department that encouraged diversity, a place in which discrimination of any kind was simply impermissible.

As a young faculty member with a lab down the hall from my former advisor's, I obviously felt a Freudian need for separation and distinction from my "father," all the more by being something of a '60's wannabe. (Alas, I had only two years on the faculty when I could still "not trust anyone over 30.") I increasingly shifted away from ecology as such, and toward evolution, in both my research and teaching. I developed full-scale courses in evolution at both the undergraduate and graduate levels, largely on Slobodkin's suggestion. Doing so was a pivotal event in my life, since developing these courses led to writing a textbook (Futuyma 1979), which has had many further consequences; and so although it is difficult, if not impossible, to establish the "cause" of a one-off event, Slobodkin's suggestion of my teaching role surely had a major effect on the whole of my subsequent career. As for my research, it has hardly strayed from the theme of evolutionary ecology — in particular, the evolution of interactions between species — that marked its beginnings. To be sure, in the 37 years since I became (at least formally) Slobodkin's colleague, our conversations about the details of my research have been no more frequent than with most of my other colleagues, but our discussions of ideas and events in the ecological and evolutionary arena have been innumerable. And in that interval I have continued to learn from Slobodkin, about much more than ecology.

How can you measure what you have learned from someone who shows you a new world, with new perspectives, ways of thinking, even values, and by example, conviction, humor, and force of personality draws you into it? Slobodkin, whose father was a recognized artist, was a product of the intellectual and political culture of Jewish New Yorkers that was a major force in the mid-twentieth century, and which continues today as the core of an East Coast literary community that is still proud to be called liberal. When I entered graduate school, I had, to be sure, made the acquaintance of Homer and Mozart, but I had hardly ever stepped inside the Metropolitan Museum of Art, only five blocks from my high school; I had met almost no one who might be called intellectual; I had yet to overcome familial prejudices against anyone who wasn't a Polish Catholic; I had met almost no Jews and certainly had no knowledge of Jewish culture; I had virtually no political awareness or conscience at all. Intrigued by and attracted to Slobodkin's idiosyncratic and creative ecology, I gradually recognized and was likewise attracted to his invariant, sometimes formidable, intellectuality. For the first time, I came to know a man whose conversation and outlook were cosmopolitan, who respected and enjoyed learning, who was conversant not only with science but also with history, arts, and religions, and most importantly,

who held strong feelings about politics, social justice, and human rights. He represented a position I had rarely, if ever, met before: the conviction that we are individually obliged to make a difference, or at least to try to make a difference, in the lives of others. He didn't preach, he just incorporated his views, knowledge, reactions into an ever-flowing stream of stories, Talmudic curiosities, and repartee. I was learning, in a time of increasing unrest, that world events matter and that it is necessary to question conventional views, but it was important to discover that not only radical students, but also respectable professors could oppose the Vietnam war and its perpetrators. I began to appreciate pluralism, partly from exposure to Jewish tradition and learning, and partly from the value Slobodkin placed on diversity. This was one of the several currents that finally enabled me to accept myself as a gay man; moreover, Slobodkin had helped to create a department at Stony Brook that was clearly safe to come out in, at a time when this was by no means the norm for academic departments. And if, today, I can understand anything in *The New York Review of Books*, or have enjoyed Florence and Ravenna, or rage at the Bush administration's assaults on everything I value, it is partly because for nearly two thirds of my life, I have conversed with Larry Slobodkin.

To help someone into a better life might be a moral obligation; at the least, it adds value to one's own. Being a good teacher is one way of doing it. How is one to be a good teacher? My experience of my teacher started with his classroom presence, with his oddly different views, his jokes, and his clear intellect, but that was only a start. At least in my case, Slobodkin succeeded by variously challenging, supporting, providing freedom, showing care, saving me from some errors I need not detail; but mostly by being Larry: taking intellectual risks, making mistakes, focusing on conceptual questions, valuing things intellectual, insisting on liberal values and human dignity, being strong and forthright in articulating his values. No one has made a larger imprint on my education — or on my career or on my self.

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