RESPONSE TO FRIEDMAN AWARD CITATION
GARY ROSENBERG SEPTEMBER 25, 2016

Once again the History and Philosophy of Geology Division has made me the fortunate recipient of a wonderful award, this time with the Gerald and Sue Friedman Award for Service to the History and Philosophy of Geology, for which I am deeply grateful. I have thoroughly enjoyed working with and for the division.

I’m especially grateful to four colleagues who have facilitated my service to the division over the years. Bill Brice encouraged me to get involved in the division when, late in my career, I started exploring the history of geoscience in a formal way. Bill, along with Michele Aldrich and Sally Newcomb, mentored me as I learned how the division functions. They have been sounding boards on issues and a source of invaluable information on procedures. Sally and I collaborated on our division’s two GSA field trips to Philadelphia museums. I enjoyed being the impresario for those trips, but I want to make it clear that Sally was the scholar who ensured their content. I initially knew only a few of the resources that the now Drexel University Academy had to offer. Sally knew a lot more about the Academy than I did. Likewise, she knew that it would be worthwhile to include the American Philosophical Society and Library Company on our itineraries. Those visits afforded opportunities that were realized as publications and presentations for several field trip participants who thus were beneficiaries of Sally’s awareness of Philadelphia’s historical resources in the geosciences.

For the past several years, I have enjoyed passing on to Renee Clary the “division memory” that Bill, Michele, and Sally conveyed to me, together with the lessons of my own experience. What could please a teacher more: Renee was a consummate student and professional who parlayed “the wisdom of our ages and experience” and her own hard work to her own mastery of GSA’s organization, and she rapidly excelled at interacting with GSA’s personnel for the benefit of the division. And she now teaches me as well! Never having mentored a graduate student during my career, I can proudly say that Renee Clary more than makes up for it in a big way.

It has proven difficult to recruit colleagues for service to the division, but it is essential for more to rise to the occasion; the more people with division memory and willingness to share it, the better for the future of the division. Written guidelines that we have left behind are important, but advice from colleagues has an immediacy and impact that keeps the division current.

The History and Philosophy of Geology Division has meant much to me because it is one of the few divisions that is focused on people, and specifically the only one whose principal interest is the history of the ideas that helped shape the geosciences and also the biographies of those who formulated them. In fact, I am impressed that colleagues often convey a personal sense of devotion to the people they study. They make it clear that the history of the geosciences is not just a series of ideas that originate, grow, and are tested independent of the philosophical or cultural context in which they are expressed.

As geoscientists we create concepts or models that help us understand nature. Like all other scientists, we strive to be objective and we may do our research oblivious to the influence of the human condition upon our concepts. But concepts are human constructs and nowadays we start from the presumption that nature can be understood if we are diligent. So, right away, we have to wonder whether our concepts are biased by our own sentence or self-perceptions. In other words whether our simplifications are projections that obscure what nature is really all about or whether they facilitate the discovery of truths that were there all the time, even if obvious and overlooked. The historical perspective sifts and winnows these issues case by case.

When René Descartes wrote in the 17th century, it was a standard belief that nature was inscrutable to all but a privileged few who alone had access to the mystical secrets of nature. But Descartes wrote that nature wasn’t mystical at all and that anyone could use observation and
measurement to gain a true understanding of nature. In effect, Descartes argued for democratizing the pursuit of knowledge about nature.

Today that democracy is at risk. Voices denying the importance of observation and measurement are working hard to supplant geoscience with demagoguery. Excessive commodification of natural resources and the consequent disruption of natural environments from the local to global scale are among the consequences. This cannot easily be undone; it comes up against the ethical backbone of geoscience: the concept of deep time. Our planet and its resources took billions of years to evolve, in many cases under conditions far from equilibrium with the present environment, so the diminishment of the planet cannot be rectified over the lifetime of a civilization. Therefore, we must be custodians of the planet and of its life, not exploiters of them.

This concept has not only survived but strengthened despite attempts to falsify it over centuries of scientific study. Not even scientists have succeeded in falsifying it.

No one is in a better position than historians of geoscience to remind the general public as well as demagogues and even our own students and fellow scientists of this resilience. And it has been my pleasure to have facilitated the History and Philosophy of Geology Division in its efforts to do so.

Thank you again for appreciating my efforts.

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Gary D. Rosenberg  
Milwaukee Public Museum  
September, 2016