

November 1, 1986 (vol. 2, no. 7)

Dear Colleague:

As an undergraduate at Cambridge, Charles Darwin was strongly influenced by Alexander von Humboldt's Personal Narrative of Travels to the Equitocstial Regions. This work inspired Darwin to contribute to the "noble edifice of Natural Science." In making his contribution, however, Darwin quite unintentionally dislodged Humboldt from the pedestal of science, rendering the latter's crowning achievement Kosmos, a grand synthesis of nature the last volume of which appeared in 1862, quite obsolete.

Charles Darwin's Autobiography contains much that should encourage a graduate student, especially one who doesn't write easily or feels that he is not very clever. Darwin regrets his difficulty with expressing himself "clearly and concisely," a difficulty that has caused him "a very great loss of time." But he sees a compensating advantage. This lack of facility, he says, forces him to think long and intently about every sentence, and thus he has been led to see errors in reasoning and in observation that others mentally more agile fail to catch.

Darwin goes on to say: "I have no great quickness of apprehension or wit which is so remarkable in some clever men, for instance, [Thomas] Huxley. I am therefore a poor critic: a paper or book, when first read, generally excites my admiration, and it is only after considerable reflection that I perceive the weak points." Darwin, unknown perhaps even to himself, is here describing an advantage rather than a handicap. Unlike his quick-witted and sharply critical friends who go into a work with darts all ready to fly and therefore can hardly learn anything from it, Darwin with his natural tendency to admire and hence be receptive can always pick up a useful fact or two, or possibly a useful idea, before he wields the knife. You see how charity is highly desirable even in intellectual endeavor?

I am inclined to think that clever people cannot be creative: they tend to focus too sharply too soon. A creative individual has a high tolerance for ambiguity and complexity. On the other hand, dear grad, if you wallow in ambiguity and complexity you will get nowhere: sooner or later you have to start drawing lines--even if they are made up of dots.

Darwin was an unprecocious giant. He, rather than Newton, is the model for the aspiring geographer. His early sympathy for Humboldt is understandable and not only because both enjoy the study of the messier aspects of nature.

Best wishes,

