

Larry Gelfand
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Observations on Behalf of the Department of History

I'm Linda Kerber, and I have been Larry's colleague since I joined the Department in 1971. Come to think of it, Larry was my *first* colleague: when the prospect of my joining the Department was still a gleam in Sydney James's eye, Larry and Ellis were deputized to have a drink with me at the OAH annual meeting in New Orleans. Well, I thought it was just a glass of wine, but they were sizing me up. Larry was relaxed; his eyes twinkled; it was unlike any interview I'd ever known. Miriam joined us; I remember asking her whether it was possible for our sons to have bar mitzvahs in Iowa City. Certainly, sez she, without ambivalence. So here we are, and it's all your fault.

When I actually came to Iowa City, my visit included a Friday, and the department did something we would never do today: invited me to sit in the Department meeting, as long as I could bear it. All I remember is that it was impenetrable and interminable. Somewhere in the course of those days Larry conveyed to me some of the rules that guided his colleagues:

1. Long, even interminable meetings mean that everything is being brought to the Department, and not settled *ex cathedra* by the chair or executive committee.
2. Do not succumb to invitations to write textbooks. This place is about scholarship. We do basic research here. (For Larry, the most joyful moments were finding recently opened Record Groups at the National Archives.

I'm not the only one of us who were clued in to the way we practice history here by Larry's instruction and Larry's example: Jacki Rand remembers gratefully that when she was newly arrived Larry took her out to lunch and overcame whatever generational awkwardness she felt. When Mac Rohrbough joined the Department, Larry took him out to lunch at what was then the old Jefferson Hotel, "and in these sessions in the hotel dining room (we could hear the Rotarians singing in the next room), in instructed me in the profession. How the department worked. Suggestions on advising graduate students. How the College of Liberal Arts worked. Professional meetings. Articles. Book reviews. It was a great tutorial!"

If we have maintained our focus on nurturing research, Larry's example is a large part of the reason why. A few years after I joined the Department I sublet Larry's office when he was on leave. Bookshelves lined the walls, filled to the ceiling. On top of and tucked inbetween, in piles on the floor and the desk, were papers, pamphlets, xeroxes – there was hardly room for the occupant. The office conveyed a historian surrounded by the tools of the trade and research materials all screeching: READ ME. READ ME FIRST. PAY ATTENTION. DON'T FORGET ME! I realize that my own office now resembles his; we don't want to hide our working papers. Katherine Tachau remembers that during her interview with him, Larry “summarized succinctly and accurately the research of almost every other member of the Department, with such respect and interest for his colleagues' work that I was sure this was a wonderful and collegial department.”

“Collegial” did not mean wimpy. Ellis Hawley, perhaps his closest colleague, with whom he devised many collaborative project, remembers :

“Larry had firm beliefs about a number of things and on occasion could get involved in heated exchanges with those who objected or disagreed. But he also had an amazing capacity for restoring and maintaining good and eminently workable relationships. I can recall only one instance where we had some heated words, a disagreement over the work of the Center for the Study of Recent U.S. History. But the next morning, he was in my office with an apology, a gift, and his usual sweetness and light. You couldn't stay mad at him.”

I was stunned (still am, actually) to discover that in many universities faculty compete about the number of graduate students who are their “dissertators” – that has been foreign to our practice, not least because Larry modelled it so well with his great partner Ellis Hawley. No one counted scalps, or worried who was first or second reader. That set an example for us all.

Perhaps it was Larry's understanding of diplomacy that underscored for him the larger institutional contexts that shape our work. My first memory of Larry after I joined the Department was the evening we had invited several colleagues to dinner. Just before dinner Larry called, “Turn on the TV news. NOW!” And there was Larry, making waves at the State Historical Society, in a struggle with its superintendent, “Steamboat Bill” Peterson, over the

direction of the institution, which had been emphasizing “pop history” at the expense of collections and research. Larry came in fresh from battle, animated at fighting the good fight, and Dick and I felt very proud that we had come to a place where history mattered, and our colleagues were in the thick of it. (And the direction of SHSI was indeed shifted, and we all continue to be its beneficiaries.)

When Larry and Ellis noticed, back in the late 1970s/early 1980s, that a high proportion of secondary school history teachers were chosen as athletic coaches first, without much training in History, they organized a committee of colleagues from other institutions in the state, prepared a report that revealed the practice and made waves in the Des Moines Register.

And of course the closest context is our own university. It was Larry, Katherine remembers, who “first clued me in to how interesting service on the Faculty Senate could be.” For our generation, Larry was the first of a string of Presidents of the Faculty Senate – Shel, Jeff Cox, Katherine herself – all of whom used their bully pulpit forcefully and to all of whom we are indebted.

Virtually everyone who thinks of Larry thinks of his “strongly worded” letters, letters, Alan Spitzer reminds us, “in the service of truth.” Alan says they began with “one directed to General Eisenhower regarding misstatements about the situation – I believe it was in Korea – at the end of the Second World War. In response, Larry was assigned a jeep with the mission to gather information that would set the record straight.”

So Larry knew, early on, that whining was not enough; that our civic task is to put our assessments on paper, stand behind them, and never give up the effort to persuade.

His daughter Julia captures this precisely:

Ironically, Dad died the day some people on the Iowa Board of Regents and in the Iowa Legislature questioned whether the awarding of sabbaticals should be reconsidered in this economic downturn... You can be sure that if he returned to Iowa alive, strongly worded letters would have been composed and immediately sent to members of the Board of Regents educating them on the value of the academic enterprise, how it takes time, talent and resources to contribute to scholarship ... You can imagine the rest. He would have been incensed and may have hand-delivered them to Des Moines himself.”

As Julia says, his academic politics were linked to his defense of the integrity of scholarship, from Steamboat Bill to sabbaticals. And he may well have learned his political strategies while pursuing his own scholarship: “Diplomacy,” wrote Lewis Einstein, whose memoir Larry edited, “is a profession which lies on the borderland between history and gossip.” [p. xxxiii] Here is some advice that Larry finds Colonel House, Woodrow Wilson’s closest adviser, offering a young diplomat who had an appointment with the President:

Never begin by arguing. Discover a common hate, exploit it, get the President warmed up and then start in on your business.

[Still useful for the rest of us, engaging the Board of Regents.]

I find these lines in Larry’s splendid, important first book, *The Inquiry: American Preparations for Peace, 1917-1919*, published by Yale in 1963 (and now \$200 on rare book lists). I am struck by how it seems more fascinating now than it did when I first perused it; the half century since its publication has taught us more than we wish we knew about the difficulty of making robust peaceful solutions to war. I read it originally as something about the past; I read it now, older and maybe wiser, as a book about the present.

Larry never stopped working as a historian. He heeded Rabbi Tarfon’s charge about not abandoning the task even when you cannot complete it. During what we now know were the final years of his life, when he was allegedly “retired,” Leslie Schwalm reports that “Larry was my research companion..... Deep in the bowels of the law school library, we were very often the only people in the Special Media room and kept each other company over very long stretches in front of the microfilm readers.”

Larry was writing another book: *Democracy and Tyrannies: The United States and the Rise of the Nationalist Dictatorships During the Years between the Two Worlds Wars of the Twentieth Century*. We have the unfinished manuscript. By treating nine dictatorships – as disparate as those of Juan Vincent Gomez in Venezuela, Antonio Salazar in Portugal, John Metazas in Greece, as well as the better known ones of Mussolini and Hitler – we are taught that these are not merely episodes in the history of Latin America, Europe and the Middle East, taken separately, but, seen through the prism of the State Department’s engagement, they are actually

episodes in the history of the United States.

And because this book, like *The Inquiry*, relies heavily on state department cables, which Larry early recognized offer us the unmediated conversations that drive our diplomacy, both books literally vibrate – as Pat Goodwin, who typed the new manuscript observed – in the air of the WikiLeaks. [Larry was just using the old ones, available because the State Department opened its 25year old files (as it is legally mandated to do but no longer does reliably.)]

Larry understood himself to be part of a group of colleagues who modelled the academy for the next generation. He had wide ranging interests in music (with special affection for the work of Ludwig Spohr) and poetry (as you see on your program). And so it's only right that I'll give the last words to one of the younger members of our Department, Catherine Komisaruk, who deeply regrets that she cannot be here today. Catherine came long after Larry had retired, and only met him a few times – first at a brunch at Connie Berman's – “and immediately sensed that he was one of the many really excellent things about the History Department.” She writes: It must have taken me a while to realize Larry was a member of our department-- but I remember it was somehow revealed that Miriam had taught Russian, and had lived in China. I was immediately fascinated with this amazing career and couple, and I probably grilled her far beyond what was polite. Her husband... showed as much interest as if he too were meeting her for the first time. I remember.... Larry Gelfand's great warmth and humor. Though quiet, he was a great presence, an avuncular sort in the best sense. Meeting him and then realizing he was an emeritus professor of history helped confirm for me the sense that Omar and I had come to the right place.

We all came to the right place, thanks to you, Larry. And we are grateful.