

I first met David Dresser in the spring of 1973 when I was 20 and I had been told by Av Mitchison at UCL that he was looking for a PhD student – he told me that David was “a good egg”. I went up to Mill Hill and was immediately captivated – his small lab was asking simple but challenging questions about the immune system, and the environment of NIMR as a research institute was wonderful. I was offered the studentship and started on 1 October that year. It was a department of greats, Ita Askonas, Mike Parkhouse and Brian Thomas were all formative influences.

It was a tremendous experience working with David; he was purely led by fascination with science and without an ounce of self-importance (which was as prevalent then than now) - he treated everyone as equals from the start. It was a wonderful environment, full of excitement but also mischief – one example was the fictional author he added on to a paper so that he could exchange humorous letters with Galadriel Mirkwood, Polly Matzinger’s dog. But equally, David could be the most intellectually challenging, questioning and rigorous supervisor a student could have.

Towards the end of my PhD, David had a few words with me – very much his style, giving timely advice – about post-doc positions. He wrote letters to people he knew in the US and I ended up going to two in succession, at CalTech and UCLA, both in Los Angeles. David had himself been a postdoc at CalTech and with the same mentor, Ray Owen; we greatly enjoyed California and David subsequently came to stay with us while I was at UCLA and we were living by the ocean in Santa Monica – I vividly remember us renting bikes and cycling down to Venice Beach during his stay.

Later, I returned to Mill Hill and then joined the faculty at Imperial College in London, In 1995 I moved to the University of Edinburgh to take up the Chair of Zoology that had become vacant on the retirement of Murdoch Mitchison (Av’s brother). As it happened, the building was the same one as David had worked in for his PhD and as a Lecturer before his own move to Mill Hill.

At that time, David had himself retired from Mill Hill and was working in a developmental biology lab in Rennes, in France. French scientific politics are complicated and he found that he couldn’t continue there. He called me up and inquired whether he could join the lab in Edinburgh. I was of course positive, but also a little apprehensive about how the dynamics of my group would change.

I shouldn’t have worried in the least. David brought immense knowledge, experience and wisdom to the lab, and was able to spend a good deal of time talking to and helping the younger staff and students. Countless times in lab meetings he would offer up important insights from the most technical issues with someone’s work to challenging the central questions of a project. And he would take me aside, as in older times, for a quiet word of advice when anything was going amiss in the lab that I might not have paid attention to. These were treasured years, for everyone a special person in the lab, who really paid attention to every individual and was a constant source of insight and perspective.

What did David mean to me? Firstly, huge integrity and commitment to people – irrespective of status, actually respect in inverse relation to status! Deep humour, always self-deprecating, often fatalistic and stoic but based on his inner strength, resilience and belief in his own ideas. In later years it cannot have been easy to keep his research going, with eyesight failing and then losing Anne – but David was someone that everybody was only too pleased to help, to try and repay all that he had given to his labmates and workmates. Losing David is now a shock, I for one will always remember, and live up to, his principles – scrupulously honest and fair, ever striving to solve Nature’s mysteries, always generous in his guidance and support for the younger generation. David was a unique teacher to us all.

Rick Maizels, 5 March 2020