

AAG Newsletter of the Association of American Geographers

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Executive Director Emeritus: A Tribute to Ron Abler

A major chapter in the history of the AAG is drawing to a close this month, with the departure of Ron Abler as one of its longest-serving executive directors. During the past six months, Ron has been gradually disengaging from many functions at the AAG, and I have gradually been assuming some of these—a process of leadership mitosis that will result in this case not in a cloning, but in an evolution of the directorship that in many ways will closely resemble the past, yet still permit new possibilities. As this process of transition completes its course at the AAG this month, I'd like to pause to acknowledge in these pages the obvious, which is the tremendous contribution that Ron has made to geography and the AAG over the past thirteen years of his tenure as executive director.

We as geographers have had the great good fortune for over a decade to have had as our mate, leader, colleague, mediator, slave, and visionary an extraordinarily talented, hard-working, and committed friend in Ron Abler. Though I have counted Ron as a personal friend for many years, the unexpected circumstance of working jointly and closely with him for the past year and a half has been a rare and wonderful experience, one of those pleasures in life made all the more so by virtue of its unplanned and otherwise unanticipated occurrence. Ron has been everything one could hope for in a colleague: mentor, help-mate, co-strategist, intellectual sounding board, and friend.

Few of our members are in a position to fully appreciate the sheer amount of work involved in serving as executive director. For years Ron has successfully juggled the many competing demands of 7,000 members, the torrential rain of e-mail that falls upon the AAG, and the complex tasks of

organizing and managing multiple publications, meetings, and external relationships with those in government, other disciplines, the growing private sector of geography, and our many sister organizations. As the central office staffing and technology requirements change so do the management and technical challenges of the organization's leadership. While guarding traditions, Ron has been prescient in initiating change to address these areas as well. And with congenial good humor, he has steadfastly navigated the inevitable occasional storm or intemperate squall, always keeping the AAG moving forward and on course throughout.

To me, one of Ron's most significant but perhaps less well understood long-term accomplishments as executive director has been to promote and sustain the breadth, unity, and diversity of geography in the United States during a decade of rapid change. Geography remains today one of the few disciplines that can meaningfully explore, within the tradition of a single discipline, essential questions of how the natural sciences, social sciences, and the humanities can interact and inform one another in the search for knowledge, explanation, and understanding through concerted intellectual activity. In part because my own past work, intellectual interests, and on-going sources of fascination with geography span so many sub-fields, I share with Ron a particularly strong commitment to ensuring that our efforts at the AAG sustain vibrant perspectives and adherents from across the full breadth of the discipline. As a result of these traditions, we in geography are in a unique position to contribute to the increased emphasis on integrative approaches to science and the arts. This is a

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tradition that we would be ill advised to jettison at a time when the rest of the world is just beginning to appreciate its significance. Perhaps it was dwelling on the importance of traditions entwined with innovation that moved me to such great emotion when, during the last meeting of the AAG Council, Ron was honored as “Executive Director Emeritus.” I hope this designation will be one more thread linking Ron to the AAG in the years ahead, and that we can tug on that string from time to time for advice, knowledge, or guidance. And if we are particularly lucky, we’ll have the pleasure of many more of those glimmering Abler insights, delivered over a glass of wine, with the rascal’s wry humor, the bard’s eloquence, and the “gravitas of the emeritus.”

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