“YOU’RE A COLLEGE PROFESSOR? WHAT DO YOU TEACH?”

Ugh! How I dread that question, because I know if I respond, “Geography,” I’ll hear something like, “Oh, I loved geography in school! I memorized all the mountain ranges and rivers in India!” or “I have a subscription to National Geographic! I love pictures of elephants!” or “How can you keep up with all those crazy new countries in Europe?” Occasionally I’ve been met with the worst retort of all, the disapproving, “Oh.” What’s that supposed to mean?

I’m a bit defensive when it comes to my dear-old-friend geography, so I’m always convinced that people who are ignorant about “real geography” are disgusted with the thought that anyone could make a living mastering the world of maps and trivia. I am paranoid that they suspect me a sham. The weight of such incrimination is unbearable, even if it’s untrue.

I’ve had that exchange many dozens of times in the years since I first declared geography my major, and I cannot think of a single instance in which I did not feel compelled to set the record straight, to defend my craft from either exuberant ignorance or patronizing scorn. I quickly find myself in full-blown, first-day-of-the-semester lecture mode, with people who really don’t want a lecture on geography. I fear my own pedantic tendencies, but I can’t control them in the face of a challenge to my career and my love for my discipline.

For a few years, I plotted to avoid all this unpleasantness by answering the dread question with, “I teach astrophysics” or “nanotechnologies” using a fake BBC-flavoured British accent for effect, but the risk, however small, that my interrogator would know something of astrophysics or nanotechnology, was always too great. I’d be exposed as a fraud, an American...and a geographer. Eventually, I found that I could proudly announce my career while inviting others to hear a little geography propaganda lecture by noting that I teach “Business Geography,” “Medical Geography,” or “Forensic Geography.” When I note the specific courses I teach, rather than the department
affiliated with those courses, the response I get is more along the lines of “Wow, I didn’t know there was such a thing. What’s that all about?” Now I have an entrée to launch a much-abridged spiel about how geographers can study any subject, as long as that subject takes place, because geography isn’t really much of a subject but rather a discipline, with its own strategy for seeing the world, asking questions, solving problems, and communicating results, that allows geographers to study just about anything, anytime, anywhere.

If time for conversation is abundant (as when I’m flying to Kazakhstan or standing in line at the DMV), I explain what geography is and what geographers do. If I were ever at a Sci-Fi convention talking to a guy dressed like Darth Vader, I would explain it like I do on the first day of class in my introductory courses. In those courses, about five years ago, I started using Star Wars analogies to add color to my lecture about geography-as-discipline. Since this imagery has proven to be so powerful, I’ve written this essay so that others interested in geography may use or experiment with these analogies. In this essay, I rely on Lucasfilm terminology, derived from the double trilogy, to illuminate what geography is and what geographers do, partly in hopes that it might begin to shed its unfortunate reputation as the study of place names and maps. I hope the curmudgeonly image of geography can be replaced by something not only more accurate but bearing a bit of ultimate-space-fantasy-badass imagery. Maybe we’ll all get a few more majors. Who knows?

I can claim with some certainty that the students who’ve taken a few classes with me have energetically embraced the analogies and the imagery associated with Star Wars, and that includes those students who weren’t predisposed to nerdy science-fiction references. Today, geography students at CSUN regularly incorporate Star Wars references and photos on the Facebook page used by the student geography club to organize events and share geography-related tips and GIS (Geographic Information Software) frustrations. Some students bought plastic lightsabers to carry during commencement exercises this year, as a way of noting the completion of their apprenticeships as a Jedi-Geographers. I’m waiting for a few to openly demand that the university replace the traditional graduation march, “Pomp and Circumstance,” with the Imperial Death March (Darth Vader’s Theme) so they can receive their diplomas in a proper soundscape. As a bonus, I also get to occasionally accept the uber-cool title, “Master Graves,” which, for obvious reasons, I vastly prefer to “Doctor Graves.” I don’t mind the Obi-Wan references, but I’m a little less sure about being likened to Yoda.

Outlined below are the Star Wars analogies I’ve used over the years to help students understand that, by majoring in geography, they are entering into an apprenticeship from which they should emerge, after a few years of training, with a set of guild-craft skills that are really quite unique. What follows is my contribution to the programmatic debates that raged among a previous generation of geographers.

**Jedi Goggles**

The first of the Jedi skills a geographer-in-training (a “youngling” for undergrads or a “Padawan” for graduate students?) should develop is a heightened mindfulness about both the physical and human-ized environment. Geographers must learn to read the landscape. A well-developed ability to notice, then interpret patterns, processes, and meaning in both the physical and cultural landscapes is a key Jedi skill. Indeed it is a type of literacy. Accomplished Jedi can read the landscape as a sort of text. There is a large and fascinating landscape literature, in which master Jedis look at a scene or landscape (everything from a meandering stream to a fast-food restaurant) and, using their Jedi skills, spin an expansive story about the forces that produced the landscape and the force that the landscape exerts on those around it. I frequently urge students to put on their “Jedi goggles” so they can see such patterns. Eventually, with practice, they are able to derive rich meaning from the landscapes they encounter. I must admit that I rely heavily on another
pop culture reference, Harry Potter, here as well. In a scene from one of the Potter movies, Harry finds himself on a noisy, purple, triple-decker bus streaking at break-neck speeds through London. When Potter asks the bus conductor, “What about the Muggles? [i.e., nonmagical folk] Won’t they see us?” The conductor replies, “Muggles? They don’t see nuthin’, do they?” Geographers are not Muggles. We must be able see what others don’t, because we look for meaning where others assume there is none. We find meaning in a text that others rarely notice, and almost inevitably fail to understand. Advanced Jedi become adept at using their other senses to inventory and analyze the landscapes around them.

**Jedi Mind Tricks**

The reason geographers look for meaning where others assume there is none is because geographers also have a special “Jedi way” of acquiring knowledge. I tell students to “Use the Force.” Others might call this engaging an epistemology. Geographers seek knowledge in a way that is peculiar to our discipline and because this style of knowing is so powerful, it seems legitimate to characterize it as “the Force,” that mystical energy that fuels the Jedi way. Students and scholars of all disciplinary backgrounds are interested in understanding why things are the way they are, how they came to be that way, why things work the way they do. Geographers ask these very questions, but as Jedi-geographers seek to understand “why,” we invoke the force—and, by doing so, privilege the question “where?” Place, location, and space are the tools that allow us to invoke the force. When Luke Skywalker was in training, he was encouraged to learn to “stretch out with his feelings” in order to use the force. Padawan learners in geography are instructed (in a Yoda voice): “As you seek the answer to ‘Why?’, ‘Where?’ is the question you must ask.”

I generally present the following example of how I have used the Force while explaining how a Jedi mind trick might work to answer a tough question. While trying to determine the target demographic of predatory lenders, I made a request for a database of loan office addresses. The person who possessed the dataset had been researching the topic for years, but still asked me, “Of what value is this address roster?” I replied, “I’ll use this to map the locations of these storefront lenders, and analyze the patterns I find against the demographics of the neighborhoods where they cluster. That way, we’ll better understand this industry’s business model.” The reply: “We’ve had this data for years. Nobody has once considered mapping it to address that question.” My reply (under my breath): “It’s the first thing I thought to do. I am a Jedi.”

**Light Sabers**

Of course, students want to know about brandishing lightsabers. They ask excitedly, “When can I learn how to use a lightsaber so I can smite that guy who stole my prom date?” Well…we don’t have lightsabers per se, but we do have tools (or “weapons” if you must!) that are unique to the Jedi way. The most lightsaber-like tool geographers have at our disposal is GIS. Like the lightsaber to the Jedi, GIS is a unique weapon, nearly exclusive to our ancient order, which, when used skillfully, can help conquer foes, like hypotheses, and occasionally strike down other enemies (economics majors?). The GIS-saber is a remarkable tool because it allows geographers to grapple with datasets and data types that elude the software and analytic devices of other disciplines (SPSS?). For starters, GIS allows Jedi to easily analyze data from widely disparate data sources, like incidence of robbery and elevation and rainfall totals. This is not to say that Jedi geographers can’t pick up a blaster (survey instrument) or pilot a death star (Excel?); rather, it can be said that GIS allows Jedi to make use of data that practitioners of other disciplines find incompatible. By combining GIS with a powerful set of spatial analysis techniques (Guard! Turn! Parry! Dodge! Spin! Ha! Thrust!), Jedi can wield the GIS-saber with tremendous effect. Additionally, once a Jedi has become adept with the GIS-saber, he or she begins to use the force more effectively; he or she learns how to better ask more powerful questions and solve more difficult problems—by
engaging the force (epistemology) more wisely and by probing more deeply into the bag of Jedi tricks (methodologies).

**Jedi Language**

The last of the special Jedi skills that geographers should master is the unique language of our ancient order: cartography. Cartography, the ability to read and write in the language of maps, is a type of literacy that is generally restricted to geographers, and to specialists known as cartographers. GIS and various graphics software, such as Adobe Illustrator, have eliminated some of the truly arcane elements of manual cartography, but making high-quality maps that are easy to read, and that communicate clearly and forcefully, is both an art and a science that may look easy, but takes the practiced hand of the Jedi-cartographer. Certainly, a well-trained Jedi-geographer must possess robust textual literacy and numeracy skills, but in our graphics-centered, light-speed society, well-crafted maps are especially useful.

Maps have power. An example of this power was related to me by a Congressional staffer with whom I worked to pass a law regulating financial products sold to members of the military. The staffer recounted how their bill languished on Capitol Hill until she distributed a series of maps showing the intense concentration of subprime lenders near military bases. Faced with the threat of maps displaying these clusters of subprime lenders at the gates of dozens of military bases appearing in the local newspaper of each legislator’s home district, the bill suddenly found dozens of co-sponsors—and passed easily into law. My research wasn’t advanced; the data was publicly available and the analysis was simplistic. The analysis was made powerful by the map. What was once invisible was made obvious to anyone who saw the maps. It was like whispering to Congress, “These aren’t the droids you’re looking for.” I had performed a Jedi map trick.

One of the problems geography departments face is articulating the value of geography courses (and departments) to budget-obsessed administrators. Several universities in California have lost their geography program in recent years, at a time when demand for the skills those programs teach is at an all-time high. The danger comes at the same time administrators have begun to embrace assessment, a task many faculties find as annoying as Jar Jar Binks. The utility of your geography program can be made far more visible by focusing less on what your students must learn (knowledge) and more squarely on what skills they must demonstrate after having a geography course. The assessment mania that has swept through academia and the public schools can be turned away from the dark side and can strengthen geography, because geographers actually have demonstrable skills that are both methodologically and epistemologically unique to geography. These skills are undeniably valuable, and only Jedi masters can train students in the Jedi arts. That point cannot be surrendered. No other disciplinary practitioners are equipped to teach spatial thinking, cartography, or GIS. Jedis cannot be trained by geologists, nor by historians, nor by anthropologists, nor even sociologists, because none of those disciplines have mastered the Jedi skills that are specific to geography.

Perhaps in a time not so long from now, in galaxy well-known to us, geography will shed its suffocating reputation as a subject and will finally be understood as the fully flowered disciplinary practice that it is. Sure, there will remain a smallish core of subject matter expertise involving crops, capitals, climates, and it is important for Padawan learners to acquire a certain measure of facility with that knowledge so they may leverage it quickly, but such facts must cease
to be central to the public’s concept of geography the way spelling, dates, and times tables have become peripheral to the public understanding of English, history, and mathematics. We could start by petitioning Alex Trebec of Jeopardy! to stop featuring geography in his TV trivia contests. Here in California, geographers could demand updates to the State Standards for both pupils and pre-service teachers so we can bury our nineteenth-century geography and replace it with a twenty-first-century version. The administrations at all campuses have to be re-educated so they understand that geography is an essential core discipline, an indispensable element of a proper education in the Arts & Sciences. It’s ancient and it’s futuristic. In your own classes, steer your ship away from memorization. Urge your students to “use the force,” allow them to wield a light saber (even in introductory courses), and share with them how Jedi mind tricks (geography methodologies) can solve pressing, real-world problems.