

THE MEDIAN ISN'T THE MESSAGE



While thinking about the current difficulties many Americans are facing in finding a job, I was reminded of [an essay](#) by one of my heroes, the famous evolutionary biologist and science popularizer Stephen J. Gould. In 1982, Gould was diagnosed with abdominal mesothelioma, a rare and very deadly form of cancer associated with exposure to asbestos. Gould's doctor told him the cancer would take his life in 8 months. The doctor's exact words were that Gould had a "median mortality of eight months." Now most people, that is to say people who are not medical doctors, statisticians, or evolutionary biologists, would interpret the doctor to mean "you will be dead in eight months." Gould did not interpret it that way, because Gould was trained in statistics. He knew that the doctor's estimate was a statistical distribution, a bell curve with a long tail. That is to say, Gould's chances of dying the next day were very low; his chances of dying in less than eight months were good; of dying in eight months, excellent; of dying in five years, low, of dying in ten years very low. But all those possibilities were covered by the statistical distribution. Gould did not have a bomb in his chest that would go off in eight months. He might die soon -- but he might not. So Gould did not live his life as if he were on the brink of death. And in fact, he lived another 20 years, finally passing away in 2002, just a few months after I met him at a Skeptic's Society event in his honor. That Gould lived another two decades is not a miracle. It's a contingency covered by the statistical distribution. Gould's chances of living two decades were very, very low. But the chance was there, and he lucked out -- along with a lot of positive thinking and refusing to give up. What does this have to do with finding a job? This is a terrible time to look for a job. All the statistics tell us so. There are fewer and fewer jobs available, with an increasing number of job seekers. Your statistical chances of finding a new job are dropping every day. But that's just the statistical distribution. There *are* some jobs -- and someone will get those jobs. Maybe you. Pay too much attention to the statistics, and you might give up. Don't. Just because a chart says job-seekers have a low chance of finding work, doesn't mean *you* won't find work. With right attitude and some hard work, you can "luck out" the way Gould did.