

## Our Most Unforgettable Character

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and

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Sitting in a genuine Harvard insignia chair on the seventh floor of William James Hall, I was nervously doing Jacobson relaxation exercises. Thirty feet down the hall people sporadically exited from the elevator. Each time the door opened I got cramps in my stomach and had second thoughts about taking dares. I was waiting in ambush for my behavior-modifying idol, B. F. Skinner.

Two days earlier I had been telling my old friend Chip about a fantasy I'd had ever since coming to Boston. Walking through Harvard Square one day, I'd bump into "B. F." I'd introduce myself and ask him to tea (I'd heard he liked tea). He'd accept, of course, and we'd get on marvelously well.

"That's a great idea," Chip told me.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean do it," he said. "Only you're never going to bump into him. Go knock on Skinner's door and ask him to lunch."

"Yeah, sure."

"Really, M. J.—" he said seriously, "if you don't do it, you're *Chicken*."

Not with 10 milligrams of Valium in me, I wasn't. (You can't always count on relaxation exercises.)

There he was. Smaller than I had expected, almost fragile. His maroon sports jacket didn't match his checkered pants. He didn't exactly look like "a great man." But his face matched the one on the back cover of *Beyond Freedom and Dignity*.

"Excuse me, Dr. Skinner," I managed

to say. "My name is M. J., and I just always wanted to meet you."

I stuck out my hand, preparing for a quick shake and good-bye if he seemed annoyed. He took a long look (later I realized it was because his eyesight wasn't very good) and said mildly, "Well, why don't you come in and meet me?"

He asked a few questions about me and seemed pleased I was a graduate student at Boston University. "They're mostly anti-Skinnerian around here," he confided. So we talked—or rather he talked. I just nodded my head and beamed a lot. Perhaps a half hour had gone by when he started and looked at his clock. I apologized for keeping him from his work, but he didn't seem to mind and said, "I just can't resist people who like me."

I really did like him and found myself saying, "Ah, Dr. Skinner—could you ever use any volunteer help? Someone to run errands, clean pigeon cages?"

"Well," he said, looking pleased, "I probably could use some help around here." "Around here" was the immediate office, which, I now noticed, was less than elegant and not very neat, either. I remembered a scene from *Walden Two*:

... Frazier opened a door and waved me in. The room was in confusion. The bed was not only unmade, it looked as if it had not been made for weeks. The top of the desk was littered with books and papers, opened and unopened letters, pencils, a screw driver, a slide rule, and two empty glasses with traces of colored liquid in the bottoms. . . . On the floor near the window stood a large flowerpot in which an unidentifiable plant had long since died of thirst.

Frazier took a pair of soiled pajamas from a small straight chair and urged me to sit down.

"In *Walden Two*," he said, as he dropped into an ancient swivel chair at his desk, "a man's room is his castle."

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I wondered what other characteristics he and Frazier shared. We shook hands good-bye, and he told me that I had just made his day. He didn't know it, but he had just made my year.

My last job had been as a research assistant to a frenzied, overworked professor. When I started working for Skinner, it was weeks before I became accustomed to his mellow working style—and to calling him "Fred," which he insisted was appropriate. He typically arrived at the office by 9 a.m. after having walked the two miles from his home. He spent mornings researching his autobiography, dictating letters, and reading papers.

Nothing was ever so pressing that mid-morning tea was skipped. Conversations over the half-hour break ranged from how my relationship with my boyfriend was going to his views on death or the phylogeny and ontogeny of behavior. I was a receptive audience for his endless stories, and he was part of my continuing-education series. We took turns washing up.

Although the typical morning was a quiet one, Fred, being a sort of tourist attraction, got a fair share of visitors—all kinds. There was, for example, the student from Boston University whose homework assignment had been to photograph an important person. Fred got into the spirit of the project, striding around the room striking poses. "Here, take one of me haranguing the public. How about the scholarly routine at the desk? Want to see my Mona Lisa look?"

An occasional psychotic would drop in. My favorite was "God," a young man who hoped to gain Fred's support in his campaign for the presidency. He was so articulate and his movements so elegant that Fred sat entranced for half an hour listening to his plans for the American people. After he'd left, Fred commented, "He was very good, wasn't he? Remind you of anyone you know?" I was stumped and told him so. Surprised, Fred exclaimed. "Me! Who else do you know

who has such grandiose plans for mankind?"

I had been working for Fred a year and a half when he walked in one December morning and announced, "M. J., you have a rival—a very nice young man. He wants to come work for me full-time this summer. He doesn't want any pay—just wants to associate with the great man."

"Sounds like a weirdo to me."

"Not at all," Fred said. "I talked with him a little yesterday. He seemed very bright."

"What made you think so?"

"He quoted me a lot."

"Ugh."

"Well, he's coming over for tea this morning. Check him out and see what you think."

I pictured myself one-and-a-half years earlier and was prepared to meet a nervous, earnest young Skinnerian. I was not prepared to meet Robert Epstein.

Robert arrived promptly at 10. My first impression was that he was young looking for a graduate student. His slight frame and thick-lensed glasses completed the mental image I'd always had of Tom Swift, boy inventor.

The tea ritual had barely begun when the phone rang. As usual, Fred answered it, and after a minute turned to me.

"M. J., go see if *Contingencies* was ever published in paperback. This man wants a copy, and I don't want to send him a hardback."

"Excuse me, Professor Skinner." (This from Robert). "But *Contingencies* came out in paperback in 1971. It's still in print, and the price just went up a few months ago to \$7.95."

Impressed, I sat back down.

Fred finished the phone conversation and turned back to us. Robert was examining a model of a teaching machine on the desk, and Fred began to talk about it. He said that he had put years of work into developing programmed instruction, but had never made any money from it.

"But don't any of those patents you

have bring in anything?" Robert asked.

"Oh, yes, I do have two or three patents, but they've never really earned anything."

"Excuse me, Professor Skinner," said Robert, "but you have *nine* patents."

"No, I have two or three."

"I have xerox copies of nine, Professor Skinner." "Oh." Pause. "I guess I have nine." Fred changed the subject. "By the way, Robert, did you get a chance to look at the bibliography I gave you—the one listing my publications?" (Fred's secretary and I had worked for weeks helping him compile it.)

"Yes, I have it right here," Robert said as he pulled it from his briefcase. "I'm afraid there are 62 errors in it."

Fred looked startled. I giggled.

Later, Fred showed Robert around the lab and talked about projects they might tackle, and finally, after a tentative date was set for him to begin work, Robert left. As the door closed behind him Fred turned to me with a note of fervor in his voice.

"I don't care how much he knows, M. J. He'll never take your place."

"I'm not worried, Fred. I don't think it's *my* job he's after."

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Did you have to pick on my glasses, M. J.? Is nothing sacred?

I see Skinner as a man who loves to learn—and not just about psychology. He receives more than 20 literary and scholarly periodicals and keeps up with all of them. He saves tidbits that interest him, which easily keeps both his home and school offices overflowing with unfiled scraps. Sometimes he passes something along to me, and I've come to look forward to his choices. A recent one that caught his eye was an Ann Landers squib about a cat that found its way home from 400 miles away. "The explanation?" it said. "Instinct." Skinner was amused. He underlined the word "Instinct" in red.

The breadth of Skinner's interests is evident in his writing. I've been editing the notebooks he has kept for the past 25

years. He has recorded many ideas for experiments and theoretical papers in the note-books (he keeps a tape recorder by his bed—"never can tell when inspiration strikes"), but at least half of the notes are non-scientific. There are character sketches, comments on books (*the Rise of the West, Le Neveu de Rameau, Antic Hay*, and so on), films (*Pather Panchali, The Glass Bottomed Boat*), music (especially Wagner), sex, politics, religion, and just about everything else.

Somehow, he never seems to forget this great wealth of material. At teatime, I often talk about whichever book I've been reading over my breakfast cereal. He manages to speak about the details of a piece I've just read with more assurance than I can—as though someone had warned him the night before what the morning's topic would be. A few days ago, I finished reading Kingsley Amis' *Lucky Jim*, a book Skinner recommended. At this moment, I'm trying, unsuccessfully, to remember the name of the tottering, absentminded professor Jim tried so hard to please. Skinner will know.

Just as he fantasized in *Walden Two*, he now firmly believes that one can be *really* productive and creative only a few hours a day, so he spends only a few hours each day at hard work. I've told him that he wastes too much of his time. I entered his office one morning to find him slowly and steadily punching holes in a large stack of papers. He had just bought a new Heavy-Duty-Three-Hole-Puncher and was trying it out. He would take a small stack, punch the holes, and then pass the stack to M.J., who put it into a notebook. And then he'd do the same with another small stack. They saw my dismay and smiled at me as they continued to "Work." After a while M. J. winked and I went back across the hall to the lab. (Skinner has accused me of having "a cruel superego." But it's the *contingencies*, I tell him. Look at the *contingencies*.)

He called me up one Saturday morning

a little before 9 (it amused him that I was still in bed) and invited me to come to his house to build a device for our rat chamber. He worked—and had me working—harder than I ever do. He improvised a clever gadget from an old chocolates tin, two spools of thread, and a slice of an adding machine cover, among other things. The tin was turned slowly by a motor, and after the basic pieces were in place, he insisted that we plug it in. I objected. “It’s not finished. Why plug it in?” He paused, his face brightened, and he replied, “Why, to see it go, of course!”

He is equally enthusiastic about most tasks he tackles. At times I have been jealous of his zeal. I “lucubrate”—that is, I sort of hover over my desk in the wee hours and hope for the best. But he just sails through a day. He rises at 4:30 a.m., writes intensively for several hours, arrives at Harvard at 9 a.m. in high spirits, works on odds and ends and answers correspondence till lunchtime, and spends the rest of the day relaxing or doing light, work-related tasks. He’s in bed by 9. He bubbles with suggestions for experiments and projects nearly every day. After one such suggestion I generously said, “That’s a *great* idea!” He beamed. “You see?” he said. “There’s good stuff in me yet!”

His sprightly manner often has a disarming effect on the people around him. Even his staunchest critics (or at least those who’ve met him) admit that he’s charming. His last secretary was a doctoral candidate at Boston University. She did “that other” sort of therapy—no, not Freudian, but not behavioral, either. She was so impressed with Skinner’s work habits and zest that she actually had second thoughts about behaviorism.

She told me once that she was concerned about the fact that Skinner never criticized her poor typing. I explained, to her amazement, that he doesn’t criticize or punish. I’ve seen him go out of his way to feign ignorance rather than correct

people’s mistakes. We’ve argued about this. He stubbornly insists on using positive reinforcement, no matter what the cost. But to do that, to refrain from simply giving instructions or trying to suppress unwanted behavior, means you must wait for some “right” behavior to occur. And that might take a long time to happen. An adventuresome young man I know made a habit of entering Skinner’s office without knocking or otherwise announcing himself. This happened every day for about four months. Finally, it was on a Tuesday, I think, he knocked loudly on Skinner’s door and said, “Good morning, I thought I’d let you know I was here today.” Skinner swung around in his chair and said cheerfully, “Oh, hello! And *thanks* for knocking. I like it when people do that.”

He tenaciously claims that *waiting* for the right behavior to occur is the best way to maintain a warm relationship. But how absurd it was to wait four months for me to knock on a door. How absolutely absurd!

Is it his science of behavior that has made him so strange? Perhaps, but even more perplexing are the ways the science hasn’t affected him. As you may know, it can be frustrating talking to an ardent behaviorist, even under the most casual circumstances. At a cocktail party once I began a sentence “The way to use the word. . . .” That evoked a glower and a correction from a nearby behaviorist. “You don’t *use* words,” I was told. “You *say* them.” I came to Skinner prepared to speak *behaviorese*—to “covert” (rather than think), to have “faulty recollections” (rather than a bad memory), and to say “I’ve no answer” (instead of “I don’t know”)—and all for nothing. He just *doesn’t do it*. He is comfortable speaking English, and he makes his listeners comfortable in doing so. One forgets in casual conversation that he is the quintessential behaviorist. He can snap back to the jargon, of course—his notebooks are filled with it—but he

doesn't burden everyday listeners with that particular skill.

In a conversation a few weeks ago, he protested when I referred to him at one point as "Skinner." For the sake of argument, I insisted that he was a great man

and that we call great men by their last names. He paused a moment, smiled, and said, "Well, let's see . . . There's Darwin, Copernicus, Galileo . . ." Another pause.

"Skinner? . . . Why not!"