
Letters

Objectionable psychologizing

To the Editor:

I was disappointed in Ted Morgan's treatment of Francis Barany and his family ("Lord of the Venus flytrap," March 31). Morgan consistently attributes the Baranys' devotion to science and hard work to their being insecure foreigners. Typical of Morgan's "explanations" of the Baranys' behavior is his comment, apropos of Francis's raising his hand in class often: "That too is a trait that might be traced to the insecurity of the displaced person."

I find this sort of psychologizing objectionable on both ethical and empirical grounds: It denigrates the achievement, and it offers an explanation for it that is as likely to be false as true. Why did Faraday and Darwin, Edison and Einstein, Freud and Russell, and countless other scientists, writers, and artists exhibit the same devotion to truth and work as the Baranys? Was it because they were "insecure displaced persons," or because they learned, early enough to make use of it, that life is potentially a big empty hole and that there are few more satisfying ways of filling it than by achieving and exercising excellence? Unless your Magazine subscribes to the doctrine of ethical relativism, to the idea that the all-American Louds are really just as good as the Hungarian-Jewish Baranys (which I cannot believe it does), it owes an apology to the Barany family, and especially to the parents, for the begrudging treatment which their achievement has received in your pages.

THOMAS S. SZASZ, M.D.
Professor of Psychiatry,
State University Hospital of
the Upstate Medical Center,
Syracuse

Misassumptions

To the Editor:

As a student at Stuyvesant High School, I read about Francis Barany with interest. Besides a rather condescending gosh-gee-he's-a-genius attitude towards Francis Barany, I thought the article made quite a few assumptions and mistakes about Stuyvesant.

Mr. Morgan made it sound
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as if the school was a garden of knowledge, full of little geniuses sprouting up from the floor. I'm sorry, but most Stuyvesant students, myself included, might seem disarmingly ordinary to Mr. Morgan.

Most of the kids are interested in marks, not school. A 95 average is always strived for, at the expense of learning. We are taught to memorize facts, take a test, get a mark and forget it. A multiple-choice test, rather than an essay or a project, is usually more important in determining how much we've learned. Certainly, there are kids who are motivated by other things than tests and marks, but they are a minority.

Mr. Morgan found Francis "an improvement over the 'typical' teenagers... hanging around in clumps and lighting up in front of the high school." . . . He failed to mention that there are students like this hanging out in front of Stuyvesant all day. Indeed, the total mood of Stuyvesant is one of apathy, cynicism, and glazedness, typical of most middle-class teenagers these days. I am not implying, like Mr. Morgan, that this means that every student who is like this is a drug addict, or sexually bored; but in my opinion, the mood and habits of the typical Stuyvesantian are the same as those of most middle-class teenagers throughout the city.

MARC LIDA
New York City

Not for all the awards

To the Editor:

After reading "Lord of the Venus flytrap" I imagined sending this note to my own mother:

Dear Mother: You can start sleeping again at night. I've found out where you went wrong. When you were buying me Barbie Dolls and Susie Walking-Talking Companions you should have been buying me games on human anatomy. When you sent me off to the movies for an afternoon, you should have requested a critical rating rather than a measure of my enjoyment. It isn't my fault I'm not a genius—it's yours.

Funny, though. I would never give up the memories of the days I spent playing with friends, exploring the attic,

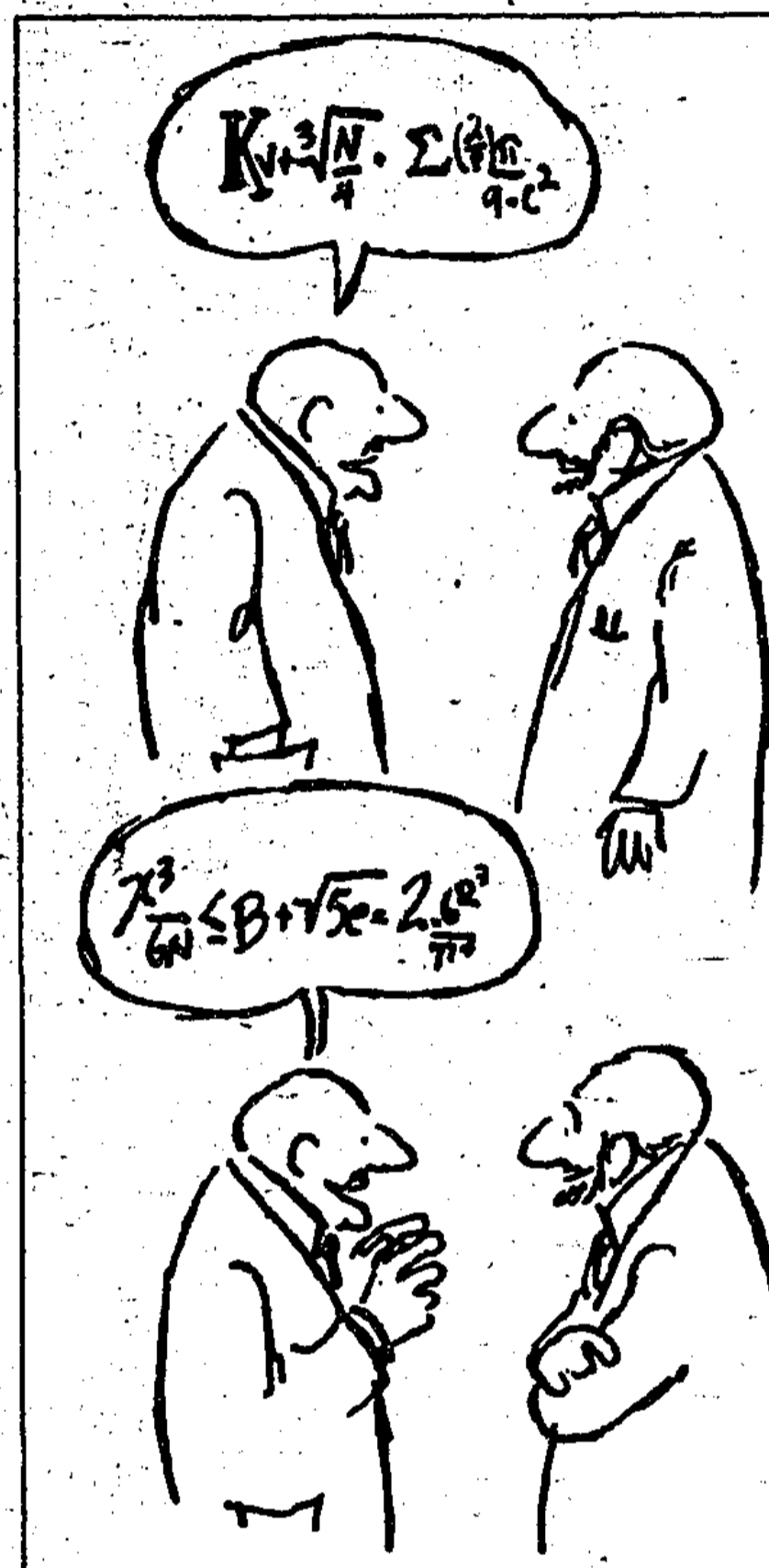
making mudpies, going to camp, crayoning the walls, fighting with my brother—not for all the Westinghouse Science Awards in the country. And do you know why? Because I will be able to reflect upon my childhood with happiness. I haven't missed a single part of life, and I realize I owe that all to you. Love, Andy.

ANDREA K. FEIRSTEIN
Maplewood, N. J.

"In" joke

To the Editor:

As many have done before, Ted Morgan made reference to a cartoon about two mathematicians in "Lord of the



Venus flytrap" but failed to credit the source.

The cartoon was by me, and originally appeared in The New Yorker, July 16, 1973.

SIDNEY HARRIS
Great Neck, N.Y.

Parents' pawns?

To the Editor:

Francis Barany is a pawn in his parents' game of life. It was genetic good fortune that the Baranys produced two outstanding intellects whose temperaments permitted such fine honing. That the Baranys have nurtured their sons' excellence and extraordinary achievements in scientific research is evidence of singlemindedness to a point of perfection. That it has resulted in their sons' unquestioning acceptance of their parents' values is dangerous.

Francis and George come across as programmed geniuses whose development was predetermined and totally im-

plemented by parents whose greatest value lay in developing their intellect. My concern is: What are Francis's and George's human values? How do they see themselves as individuals? What values (if any) do they place on feelings and emotions? How do they see themselves in relation to society? Or, do they think about these things at all?

I must conclude, from this article, that the Baranys have placed minimal value on the humanistic aspects of educating their children. There is no evidence that Francis and George have been involved in determining their own futures,

We are happy to have George Barany as one of our graduate fellows.

There is only one misstatement to which I would like to invite your attention: We are no longer The Rockefeller Institute or The Rockefeller Institute for Medical Research. Since 1954 we have assumed the status of graduate university and, in 1965, changed our name officially to The Rockefeller University.

EUGENE H. KONE
Public Information Associate,
The Rockefeller University
New York City

Stop the stereotyping

To the Editor:

Francis Barany deserves a great deal of admiration. However, Mr. Morgan's inference that we nongenius teen-agers are "sullen and apathetic" and are doing nothing but "hanging around in clumps smoking" is ridiculous.

I do not enjoy being stereotyped.
EDWARD LETZTER
Clarkstown, N. Y.

Setting goals

To the Editor:

As a Stuyvesant High School graduate and compulsive achiever, I was intrigued by Ted Morgan's story. Francis Barany, like so many thousands of motivated young New Yorkers before him, was able to reach the heights of academic excellence because a place like Stuyvesant existed. Here the gifted children of the lower-middle and working classes "prep" as the wealthy do at Exeter and Choate.

The other, more central influence for Francis was, of course, his family. In an era of "demise" for the nuclear family and aimlessness for the younger generation, it is well to examine just how Francis and many others like him managed to find a goal in life and the determination to reach it. Many of the aimless young people I have met have never had any direction at home.

The point is that every adolescent's family has the pre-eminent role in his or her intellectual and social development. The Baranys recognized this and planned the future of their sons according to the values they held dear. They systematically accustomed George and Francis to a life of the mind, and the boys came to love it themselves. What many parents do instead is to abdicate this role of director in favor of the almighty peer group, and then



Drawing by S. Harris;
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establishing their own values or experiencing the unpredictability of their own human nature. Francis and George have been actualized by their parents to the extent that they don't question their own direction. The Baranys have given each other closeness and companionship, but, it seems, solely for an intellectual marathon in a game called "Achievement." What have the Baranys given their sons in the way of compassion and warmth? In other words, how have the Baranys prepared their sons for life in the beautiful world of people?

PEGGY GOLDBERG
Chappaqua, N. Y.

Graduate status

To the Editor:

I want to tell you how much we enjoyed reading "Lord of the Venus flytrap." It was a perceptive treatment by Ted Morgan of a brilliant family.

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act surprised when their children return home with the values they have learned in the street—drugs, vandalism, or worse, aimlessness. Every child, like Francis, is an "experiment." Most do not have his potential, but each is capable of some level of accomplishment. Parents who set no goals for their children should not be surprised when they reach none.

CARL I. SCHOENBERGER
Stuyvesant High School '68,
Harvard College '72,
Tufts Univ. School of
Medicine '76
Brookline, Mass.

Folklife preservation

To the Editor:

David Dempsey's article, "Uncle Sam, the angel" (March 24), includes a significant error of fact. Johnny Cash did not sing "Welfare Cadillac" at his White House concert.

Dempsey's error is a telling indicator of the kind of attitude and emphasis all too dominant in the spending of these Arts and Humanities Endowments (although to his credit Dempsey casts a semi-critical eye on the absurdities and phoniness rampant). The Endowments do dribble some money out to folk-culture projects, but it is just that, a patronizing trickle. The focus is on the high-culture sector with seemingly little close checking of how the money is actually spent—an artificial pumping up of the frills while basic American crafts and music go largely unsupported.

For this reason there is now before the Congress the American Folklife Preservation Act (S. 1844) introduced by Senator James Abourezk last May and now widely supported in the Senate and gaining adherents in the House. Versions of this bill have been submitted before and met with opposition from the vested interests of the Endowments. But we need a separate fund directed by those who are close to folklife and who are not concerned mainly with middle- and high-brow art. Dempsey's piece, in spite of nodding over the Cash incident, exposes more than he perhaps sensed.

FREDERICK E. DANKER
Associate Professor of English,
Boston State College
Boston

Dreaming big

To the Editor:

In "Unradical sheiks who shake the world" (March 24),

Edward R. F. Sheehan states that Kuwait's Burgan field was found on the basis of a dream of Lieut. Col. H. R. P. Dickson. I am certainly no authority on the colonel's dreams, but I do know that the location for the discovery well at Burgan was made after a detailed seismic survey had been made by the geophysical department of the American Oil Company which was in partnership with the British team. Furthermore, when the discovery well was tested on open flow, the team, being familiar with the characteristics of limestone reservoirs in the Middle East, was discouraged by the rapid rate at which the reservoir pressure dropped and thus failed to realize the magnitude of its find. The American geologists, with their experience in oil fields which produced from sandstone reservoirs, recognized immediately that they had a major field. Subsequent drilling proved up the size of the structure, confirming the original seismic survey.

I have never been in Kuwait; the comments above are based on my recollection of the daily drilling reports and the correspondence which were routed over my desk in the late nineteen-thirties when I was employed by the partners of the British team.

MARSHALL SCHALK,
Professor Emeritus of Geology,
Smith College
Northampton, Mass.

Edward R. F. Sheehan replies:

I portrayed Colonel Dickson's dream and its consequences as they were related to me by authorities in Kuwait and confirmed in various published accounts. That more scientific means may also have been employed in the Burgan field does not nullify the circumstances of discovery as I was given to understand them.

High enough?

To the Editor:

Poor Vicky Ifrah! A midget at 5 feet 3, she must compensate for her embarrassing lack of stature by wearing shoes with "the highest platforms and heels she can walk on" ("How to achieve a leggy look," by Anne-Marie Schiro, March 31). Mrs. Ifrah would do well to recall the words of Abraham Lincoln who, when asked how long a person's legs should be, replied, "Long enough to reach the ground."

Come down off your pedestals, Vicky, and grow up!

ROBIN CANTOR
(5 feet 3 inches)
Ridgefield, Conn. ■