

NOTES FROM A RADICAL BEHAVIORIST: MY EVERYDAY JESUS CHRIST

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Let's see. Whom do I admire? Well, The Man, of course.

B. F. Skinner

Of course, of course. But why? Because he was the best theoretician in the field, by far. Because he could deal with the most complex of issues without slipping into a mentalistic mire, never losing his foothold on the high ground of objective data language. And because he provided objective data language. And because he provided the framework, the system in which it all fits. Every little bit of it fits right in there. Nothing left out; and if there is, we'll take care of it in the next few years. Without him, you and I would still be giving Rorschach tests or worrying about habit strength and anticipatory goal gradients.

However, I'm not sure Skinner was sufficiently tuned in to what are the actual reinforcers that control behavior. For instance, a whole generation of deadly boring programmed texts resulted from his assumption that learning was a sufficient reinforcer. And he seems to have little appreciation for the crucial role of social reinforcement, whether it be in the lives of scientists, Walden Two-ers, or the person on the street, perhaps because addiction to social reinforcement can so easily lead us astray. But ignoring it or denying it won't disappear it.

Therefore, I'd hate to trust him to sell a used car, let alone something as controversial as behaviorism. So that brings us to another of my heroes.

Dale Carnegie

That old used-car salesman, par excellence. What Carnegie contributed to behavior analysis is his deep understanding of the actual parameter values that are most effective when placed in Skinner's functional relations. He understands what really are the reinforcers and aversive stimuli in the everyday lives of everyday people, like you and me and him and Skinner and Abraham Lincoln and George Washington. We all knew that to err was aversive. But it took Carnegie to point out just how aversive. So aversive that no one ever admits an error, not if they can help it. And if you force them to, all you've done is pair yourself irrevocably with a very aversive event. So aversive that even John Dillinger, the notorious bank robber and killer, felt his only problem was that no one really understood or appreciated him. Carnegie realized the enormous capacity we have for

¹ Some content in Notes from a Radical Behaviorist has previously been published privately by the author. Materials have been updated for the current publication.

rationalization. And in watching the everyday behavior and practice of most of us behavior analysts, it looks like we have a long way to go to catch up with this old used-car salesman.

But you know, most of us don't trust Carnegie to sell behaviorism, because he's tainted with his used-car associations. We need someone who's using his insights into human nature to help save humanity. And that brings me to still another hero, a man who has built the real life community that most resembles the fabled Walden II.

Stephen Gaskin

Yes, Gaskin really did it. In the hippie era, he founded a commune called *the Farm* in Tennessee. They had 1,400 members on 1,750 acres--the biggest, most comprehensive, most intense behavioral experiment I know of. From afar at least, their child-rearing practices seemed exemplary; they supported appropriate behavior, but not inappropriate behavior. Better than most of **us** do.

They had a dozen or more satellite communes around the country. In addition they had Plenty, a charitable organization with programs throughout the world, working to combat ill-health, starvation, and human misery. As far as I can tell, all Gaskin wanted to do was save the world, not see how much of it he could rip off, not see how many used cars he could sell. In fact he and the Farm members took a vow to voluntary poverty, to use no more of the world's resources than could be available to people living in third-world countries. They tried to develop a model of self-sufficiency for such people.

Not only do I greatly admire Gaskin's goals but also his understanding of human nature, both on an individual level and on a group level. Here are some of his insights:

Don't addict others to cheap social reinforcers. And don't get too hung up on them yourself. *To be sure enough of what you're doing in your own heart that you're not going to be ruined, destroyed, devastated, or run off to tears because somebody doesn't like what you're doing.* An interesting issue to consider. How might we do this?

People who live by a waterfall eventually adapt to it and stop hearing it. People who live in a really wonderful scene eventually adapt to it and stop appreciating it. *We meet once a week and say, "lookie here, we don't want to live by a waterfall and not hear it."*

Here's what his role was on the Farm: *The thing I do is not that complicated. A lot of it is keeping my head when folks put bummers on me. I don't believe folks' bummers.* When people come in with tragedies about how they ain't getting it on with their lady or how they're going crazy or how everything is terrible, Gaskin stays cool.

If there's one person on the Farm who isn't making it, you ain't done yet... A lot of folks work at their job and figure that because they're home from their job, they're done now... But our job is being the keepers of all our brothers and sisters, and it's a 24-hour job.

I would like to think that I could take somebody (into the Farm)—who's fairly disturbed, fairly unhappy . . . and that if he could walk down on the Farm and everyone would (naturally) interact with him properly, it would heal him perfectly. If everyone was impeccable in their conduct with him . . . And to the extent that that doesn't happen, it makes it so we're not that different from New York City.

You must never underestimate your ability to help other people, no matter how small you are. They're still into your social approval.

If you fail to be impressed by the profundity of these insights, you're not alone. So did nearly everyone else in a graduate course where I used one of his books as a text. But if you'd like to check it out further, try Gaskin, Stephen, *Volume One: Sunday Morning Services on the Farm*. The Book Publishing Co., 156 Drakes Lane, Summertown, Tennessee 38483. \$3.95.²

But you know, in spite of all his lofty goals and his lofty accomplishments, in spite of his brilliant insight into the soul of man and of organizations, Gaskin still seemed to have the curse of the intellectual. He still seemed to get it off winning arguments, being right, being superior to his enemies, whether they be Ayatollah Khomeini, Nixon, Carter, Reagan, or the square American public. That sure is a hard habit to kick. And that brings us to my final hero.³

John Douglas Miller

John died a year ago; but when he was alive, he was a hog farmer and artist from Converse, Indiana. Now there are many reasons for me to admire John. For instance, he was the most sophisticated, cosmopolitan friend I had while growing up in Converse, Indiana. When I was a sophomore in Converse Jackson Township High School, John introduced me to the illicit thrills of sneaking into the Marion Air Drive-In Theater in the trunk of his folks' Cadillac. The only problem was that it was Monday night, which turned out to be buck night, the night admission was \$1 per car load; so we didn't really manage to cheat the theater. But he quickly made up for that strategic error; he broke out a six pack—my first beer. How hip can you get!!!

Well here's how hip you can get. The next year John turned us all on to something even more sophisticated, more cosmopolitan, more far out than warm beer. John turned us on to this fantastic new thing called pizza pie. All the local Future Farmers of America were going over to Custer's Last Stand and ordering two hamburgers, two, no make that one order of fries, and two big orange drinks to go. But not us be-boppers. We were going to Little Italy and ordering a king-sized pizza pie, and ice-cold beer for everyone. Let's make it Strohs. And we were able to pull it off even without fake IDs.

² My guess is it's long out of print now, but you *might* be able to tack it down through a library or Amazon.com, if you can't find it at the original address.

³ Where is Steve Gaskin and the Farm now? I think the farm has scaled way back and probably retracted most of its outreach efforts. A couple years ago, I think Gaskin was running for President of the United States on the marijuana ticket.

Not bad. But dig this. John also turned me on to surrealism and Salvador Dali. And he introduced me to a fireman in Kokomo, Indiana who painted just like Dali, complete with melting watches and receding planes. I think it was because of this influence that I nearly bankrupted our little publishing company, Behaviordelia, trying to incorporate large amounts of art into psychology text books.

And while in Kokomo, John also introduced me to the Lewis', who were jazz musicians and artists and who had the first really hip natural finished wood house I'd ever seen. I think it was because of this influence that I nearly bankrupted myself trying to incorporate that style into my own house, rather than settling for a much more sensible split-level rancher, with a colonial front.

Not only did John have taste; he also had integrity. As the decorator for the senior class play, he had an esthetic conflict with Mrs. Hamilton, the home economics teacher and play director. She insisted that the set be decorated with a perfectly hideous, middle-class, floral wall paper. But at 3:00 a.m., the morning before the opening, John snuck into the gym and painted the set a tasteful bright red.

He also got into a conflict with Rev. Davidson of the First Methodist Church of Converse, Indiana. John didn't like clichés. So he proposed that we replace the traditional Christmas nativity scene with a gigantic birthday cake that had written on it, *Happy Birthday, Jesus*. Tradition prevailed. (Years later, in the name of church/state separation, John would lead the valiant but futile fight to have the Christmas nativity scene removed from the Wabash County Court House lawn.)

And yet all these great virtues of John's are not why I admire him more than anyone I know. Here's why: A bunch of us guys were hanging out one night at The Robber's Roost, an all-night, hillbilly coffee shop in Marion. We may have invented hanging out. We'd hang out until 1:00 or 2:00 a.m., just sittin' around, drinking pop and putting down anything that moved. We were the consummate put-down artists of central Indiana. Of course, we could only laugh up our sleeves at the local toughs, eschewing violence as we did.

So this waitress came over to take our order. You know the kind, the kind who work in an all-night, hillbilly restaurant. The really dumb kind. She had never even heard of pizza pie, let alone Salvador Dali. And she had on this pair of really big, really ugly, really cheap, plastic, dime-store earrings. Poor taste. And so here's John, the artist . . . and he leans across the table and looks her in her big, dumb, blue eyes, and he says, *You know, those are really beautiful earrings. You really look nice in them.*

Well this dumb chick was flabbergasted. She didn't know what to say. She blushed. She giggled. And she finally managed to say, *Gee, thanks.*

And us guys just about fell out. John was so cool and so smooth. He had managed not only to put her down, but also to put her on at the same time. And the only thing better than a put down was a put on. He'd gotten a two-fer.

The catch is, John wasn't putting her down, and he wasn't putting her on. He wasn't even patronizing her. The earrings were beautiful. They were beautiful on her, if she liked them and if it made her happy to wear them. That whole thing was

beautiful. And that's what John was saying—*Isn't that nice you have such a pretty pair of earrings you're so happy with.*

And that's why I love John Douglas Miller. That's why he is the person I'd most like to be like. Because he is pure at heart. He never puts people down. He takes genuine joy in their happiness.

Two art majors from Indiana University loaded their most recent paintings in their car and drove for three hours all the way up to Converse, Indiana, just so they could show their old high-school art teacher, John Miller, what they had been doing. Just so he could be fantastically enthusiastic about their success. Just so he could tell them how exciting what they were doing was. Then they put their paintings back in their car, turned around, and drove all the way back down to IU. Six hours of driving, just so they could spend an hour showing their paintings to some funky old art teacher, from some funky old high school, in some funky old town. What a teacher!! His pleasure is in the success of others. His pleasure is not in beating others. And when someone does give him a rough time, he is sad, but not vindictive. He really is the Jesus Christ of Converse, Indiana.

Honorable Mention

Generally my heroes are those who have great insights into the baseness of human nature, and like those base human beings anyhow. So honorable mention goes to Bobbie Gentry and Randy Newman. Bobbie Gentry for *Ode to Billy Joe* where she so eloquently portrays how isolated and insensitive a loving family can be about the private problems each of them is having. *That Billy Joe McCallister jumped off the Talahatchi bridge. Pass the biscuits please.* (In other words, *Your school friend, Billy Joe, committed suicide. Too bad. But not so bad as to ruin my appetite. Pass the biscuits.*) This song can bring me as close to tears as any I know. And it turns me on that the literary statement of the '60s came from a Las Vegas chorus girl. (There's an old flick by more or less the same name, based on the song, and not too bad.) Oh, yes, and Bobbie rocks, too.

Randy Newman for understanding the mind of the southern redneck and yet being sympathetic toward him, in spite of the fact that the only group that dislikes southern rednecks more than southern blacks is northern, liberal, intellectual whites. Check out Randy's early albums. Oh, yes, and Randy rocks too.