Reflections on B. F. Skinner

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On August 10, 1990, late in the afternoon, B. F. Skinner (with his wife Eve and daughter Julie) entered a side door of the Boston Sheraton Ballroom. Using a cane for support, he slowly made his way to the stage where he was to receive the American Psychological Association's esteemed award for lifetime contributions to psychology. Although few of the more than 1,000 people in attendance were able to observe his entrance, it was clear that they knew he had arrived as the din of applause grew when row after row of people stood and cheered. When Fred walked past the front row I could see that he had tears in his eyes.

With TV cameras running and a horde of newspaper reporters taking notes, Fred graciously thanked the Association for bestowing upon him "his greatest honor." Then he gave 'em hell. Without notes, he recited a fifteen minute version of his most recent paper "Can psychology be a science of the mind?" in which he drew an analogy between cognitive science and creationist science. Both, he argued, were in search of a creator—cognitivists were looking for the "Self" while creationists were looking for "God." "So far as I'm concerned, cognitive science is the creationism of psychology." Gasps could be heard from all directions.

On August 18, 1990, eight days later, Skinner died of complications from leukemia. He was 86 years old. During his long and illustrious career he published more than 200 articles and books in which he laid out a philosophy, a science, and a technology of behavior. In doing so, he reshaped psychology, as he once wrote to a friend, "by making over the entire field to suit myself." Just as Darwin provided a unifying theory within biology based upon the origin of species, Skinner provided a unifying theory within psychology based upon the origin of behavior. It is understandable that Skinner has been called the Darwin of the 20th Century.

I believe the friendships in Fred's life

formed not only because of who he was but because of how he lived his life. He often regretted not having been a better teacher for his graduate students, but I found him to be an endless source of behavior worth modelling. Fred's self-managed life is well known. His routine rarely varied. He arose every morning at 5:00 A.M. and wrote for two hours. Usually his work involved rewriting the draft of some paper or chapter that he had worked on the day before. (It was not uncommon for him to write as many as 10 drafts of an article before he was satisfied.) He had breakfast while reading the *New York Times* and the *Boston Globe* and then walked the two miles to his office at Harvard where he worked on various correspondence and met with visitors. Tea was at 10:30 A.M. and by noon his workday was over. He spent most afternoons reviewing old notes, reading detective stories, and listening to music. After dinner, he watched the evening news and retired by 9:00 P.M. At midnight he would wake and work another hour.

Fred's ability to engineer his environment is legendary. Over the years, he redesigned his office—often with Rube Goldberg flare—as if it were simply a problem to be solved. He remarked often that anything he needed could be bought at Sears or Radio Shack and anything broken could be fixed with hot glue. His office remains a labyrinth of switches, pulleys, extension cords, lights, magnifying glasses, cardboard boxes, and cubby holes connected by strings, rubber bands, masking tape, and hot glue. On his desk, cluttered with gadgets and scraps of paper, are stored 12 dictionaries of various sorts (including one that he was writing himself), and his published books. Everything Fred wanted was within easy reach.

Fred's warmth and wry wit drew many people to him. But what I found equally endearing was his interest in and appreciation of things beyond psychology. He

loved poetry and literature but his passion was music. Fred would sit for hours in the afternoon listening to symphonies by Schumann, Schubert, or Bruckner, or Debussy's Nocturnes or Greig's Piano Concerto. More often, though, he would listen to Wagner.

Ironically, it was his love of music that for a short time betrayed him. Although Fred said that he was not concerned about his imminent death, for several weeks after learning that he had leukemia, he turned away from music. At different times I questioned him about it and finally, one day he acknowledged that he had played "Parsifal" that afternoon. Once again his life was full of Wagner. Recently he told a friend that he wanted to listen to "Siegfried" while he died.

The only real source of contention between us during our ten-year friendship was my driving. Because of his failing vision he had not driven for years and I was happy to serve as chauffeur. Yet, despite his poor vision, he always knew, and never failed to comment, when I stopped the car in the middle of a pedestrian crosswalk while waiting for a traffic light. More annoying, however, was his compulsion to give directions. (Apparently, this particular affliction was with him most of his life.) More than once, after settling into the passenger's seat, he would say "Today I am not going to give directions. I will just comment on things that I see out the side window as we drive by them. What an attractive mailbox." But five minutes later he would say "Oh,

here we are. Turn right at the next corner." I started charging him a dollar each time he gave directions that had not been requested. The fact is, Fred owes me \$172.00.

On August 22, 1990, Julie, Deborah, Chris (Fred's granddaughter), Michelle (Fred's secretary and friend), and I drove to a spot overlooking Willow Pond in Mont Auburn Cemetery. (Eve Skinner was still recuperating in the hospital from a broken shoulder.) It was a lovely, breezy, sunny day—the kind of day Fred would have enjoyed going for a walk. Although he did not want a funeral service, we wanted to say our goodbyes and bury his ashes. His modest headstone read "B. F. Skinner 1904—." On the drive back to the Skinner residence everyone was quiet. It was Julie who finally broke the silence: "Turn right at the next corner."

Once when Fred was feeling melancholy as he reflected on how often he had been misunderstood by his critics, he read me a passage from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. As Hamlet lay dying he said to his friend Horatio, "I am dead; thou livest; report me and my cause aright . . ." (Act V: Scene II).

Fortunately, unlike Hamlet, Fred left behind many friends.

Author Note

I thank Will Vaughan, Donna Colbeth, and Michelle Graham for their help and advice.