

Life of the Closed Mind

A GLORIOUS MORNING FOR A COMMENCEMENT, the sky a blue tent cut with wisps of clouds over the Columbia University campus. From time to time a plane bisected the air above, an accidental eavesdropper on the passage of time and the celebration of joy. Clear weather, low-flying jets: it's what some New Yorkers still can't help thinking of as a 9/11 day.

All over America graduating seniors are being reminded of what they—and their parents—can scarcely forget. Most of them left home and arrived on campus in September 2001. But that knowledge is particularly sharp here in New York. Some students chose to leave afterward, to migrate to the quiet college towns so many of their high-school classmates had chosen in the first place. But most stuck. After all, if they were scared off by what had befallen the Trade Center, then it meant the terrorists had won.

Four years have passed, and it occurs to me, surveying the Columbia undergraduates, their blue gowns mimicking the blue sky, that the terrorists did win. Since September 11 we've become more like them. The essence of the way zealots think about the world is polar: good and evil, holy and profane, them and us. "At times it can seem like your day-to-day life is an exercise in choosing sides," Lee Bollinger, the president of Columbia, said in his commencement address. In the years since the class of 2005 entered college, America has become a country that sets its young people the terrible example of closed minds. The terrorists wanted to kill infidels. We only aim to silence them.

President Bollinger, who has recently navigated a pitched battle about academic freedom and civil classroom discourse on his own campus, described intellectual inquiry thus: "To learn to ask: 'Is that true? Maybe there's something to what she just said. Let me think about it. That's interesting. Maybe I should change my mind. I changed my mind.'"

When is the last time you can honestly remember a public dialogue, or even a private conversation, that followed that useful course? To shy away from rigorous intellectual engagement is not new for undergraduates; in 1998 a study done by an anthro-

pologist at Grinnell College reported the most common discussion model among students was stating what they were certain they already believed, not learning what they did not or exploring the views of those with whom they disagreed. Eighty-four percent of the first-year class believed that one of the paramount values of the college was to make sure all its members felt comfortable. "Exploring new ideas, encountering people with different values, learning a new discipline's way of thinking and having someone point out a flaw in one's argument—these

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can be uncomfortable experiences," Carol Trosset noted in her findings.

But what was once the comfort level of 18-year-olds has now become the guiding principle of a nation, with ease to be found only among the like-minded. Today's graduates have also learned that having strongly held beliefs means expressing contempt for those of others, particularly if you are a cable-TV talk-show host and can interrupt incessantly or extravagantly mime disparagement. (Note to the class of 2005: bad manners are bad manners, whether at the dinner table or on-camera.) Politicians and pundits are now no better than corner men in an ideological prizefight.

It's no wonder, after the conspiracy that

took place right under our noses came to fruition on September 11, that we have become a nation of conspiracy theorists. But everything now is a conspiracy: a right-wing conspiracy, a Clinton conspiracy, above all a media conspiracy. When NEWSWEEK retracted its story in which an unnamed source claimed an investigation had turned up desecration of the Qur'an by interrogators in the Guantánamo Bay detention center, conspiracy theorists went wild: the magazine was a liberal hotbed of hatred for the military, the magazine was set up by the Pentagon to mask the administration's own malfeasance. No one believes in mistakes anymore, in the reporter who mistakenly believed a source was trustworthy, the editors who trusted the reporter's skill and judgment. Mistakes are an inevitable byproduct of work done by human beings under deadline pressure. But today, human error in so many arenas has been supplanted by the ubiquitous suggestion of sinister forces.

So the young men and women who began their college years in the shadow of September 11 graduate in its shadow as well. The intolerant, the monomaniacal, the zealots driven by religious certainty engineered the worst attack on American soil, and the result has been intolerance, monomania and zealotry driven by religious certainty. President Bollinger cited the contempt of Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr., the legendary Supreme Court justice, for the man who "knows that he knows." If Holmes lived today, of course, he would be either lionized or demonized. And he would find, much to his sorrow, that America had been hijacked by those who cannot tell the difference between opponents and enemies, between disagreement and heresy, between discussion and destruction.



PHOTOGRAPH BY CHARLES DIMAMNET FOR NEWSWEEK

The Oddness Of Everything

INVITED BY THE UNIVERSITY OF MIAMI TO ADDRESS members of the class of 2005, the columnist repaid this courtesy by telling them that even though they surely had showered before donning their caps and gowns, each of them had about a trillion bacteria feeding on the 10 billion flakes of skin each of us sheds in a day. If each 2005 graduate were disassembled into his or her constituent

atoms, each graduation gown would contain nothing but atomic dust. But as currently assembled, this star dust—really: we are all residues of the Big Bang—is living stuff, capable of sublime emotions like love, patriotism and delight in defeating Florida State.

The body of every Miami graduate has about 10 thousand trillion cells, each containing a strand of DNA that, uncoiled, would extend about six feet. If that person's DNA were spliced into a single strand, it would extend 20 million kilometers—enough to stretch from Miami to Los Angeles and back 2,270 times.

So says Bill Bryson, author of the delightful "A Short History of Nearly Everything." According to him, everyone now alive contains some Shakespeare. That is, some of the physical stuff he was made of. And Julius Caesar's stuff, and Genghis Khan's and Charlemagne's. And Charlemagne's cooks. There are trillions of trillions of atoms in each of us, so lots—probably billions—of atoms have been recycled in each of us from Beethoven. In that sense we all are, as Bryson says, reincarnations.

Indeed, each member of Miami's class of 2005 is related to every other member and to —facts must be faced—every graduate of Florida State. It took two parents to produce each of us, and four people to produce our parents. If we look back eight generations, to Lincoln's day, Bryson says that more than 250 people contributed to the creation of each of us. Look back to Shakespeare's day, and we are directly descended from 16,384 ancestors. Look back 64 generations, to the era of the Roman Empire, and we have a thousand trillion ancestors.

But wait. A thousand trillion people is hundreds of times more than the number of human beings who have ever lived. So

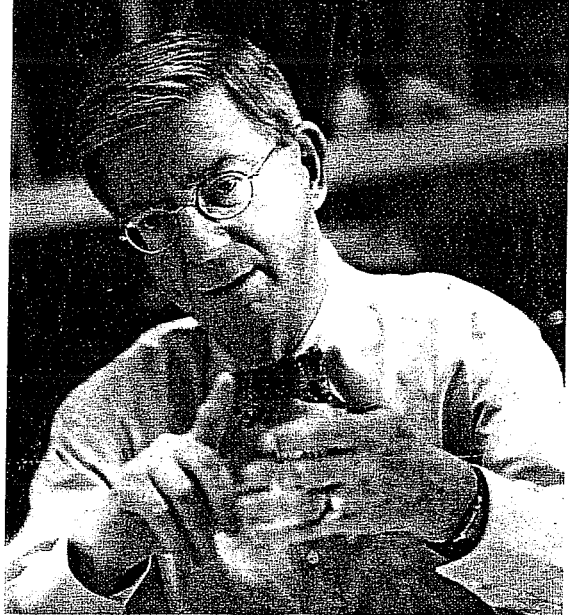
everyone is the product of a lot of incest—but incest at what Bryson calls "a genetically discreet remove." This extended single family—humanity—inhabits the little planet Earth, whose continents are wandering.

Bryson says Europe and North America are moving away from each other at about the speed that a fingernail grows—about two yards in a normal human lifetime. The African continent is creeping northward and someday will squeeze the Mediterranean Sea out of existence and will shove up a chain of mountains as high as the Himalayas extending from Paris to Calcutta.

The entire human family is the product of a lot of incest—but incest at what author Bill Bryson calls 'a genetically discreet remove.'

The Earth is restless partly because its molten core retains heat amazingly well: it has lost only about 200 degrees in the 4 billion years since the planet coalesced. Not that we have come close to that core: Bryson says that if the planet were an apple, our underground exploration would not yet have broken the skin.

The sun around which Earth orbits is one of perhaps 400 billion stars in the Milky Way, which is a piddling galaxy next door to nothing much. There are perhaps 140 billion galaxies in the still-unfolding universe. If all the stars in the universe were only the size of the head of a pin, they still would fill Miami's Orange Bowl to overflowing *more than 3 billion times*.



PHOTOGRAPH BY CHARLES DUMARNEY FOR NEWSWEEK

We should by now be used to strange thoughts. It has been 100 years since June 1905, when Albert Einstein began publishing the scientific papers that taught us that gravity bends light, that space and time are warped, that matter and energy are interchangeable, that the mass of an object increases the faster it moves and that the experience of time is a function of speed.

But there is a not-at-all-strange reason that a Washington columnist would belabor Miami graduates with strange facts. It is this: The more they appreciate the complexity and improbability of everyday things—including themselves—the more they can understand the role that accidents, contingencies and luck have played in bringing the human story to its current chapter. And the more they understand the vast and mysterious indeterminacy of things, the more suited they will be to participate in writing the next chapter.

This is so because the greatest threat to civility—and ultimately to civilization—is an excess of certitude. The world is much menaced just now by people who think that the world and their duties in it are clear and simple. They are certain that they know what—who—created the universe and what this creator wants them to do to make our little speck in the universe perfect, even if extreme measures—even violence—are required.

America is currently awash in an unpleasant surplus of clanging, clashing certitudes. That is why there is a rhetorical bitterness absurdly disproportionate to our real differences. It has been well said that the spirit of liberty is the spirit of not being too sure that you are right. One way to immunize ourselves against misplaced certitude is to contemplate—even to savor—the unfathomable strangeness of everything, including ourselves.