

MERLYN'S MAGIC... AND OURS



BY BARBARA LERNER

"The best thing for being sad," replied Merlyn, beginning to puff and blow, "is to learn something. That is the only thing that never fails. You may grow old and trembling in your anatomies, you may lie awake at night listening to the disorder of your veins, you may miss your only love, you may see the world about you devastated by evil lunatics, or know your honour trampled in the sewers of baser minds.

"There is only one thing for it then—to learn."

T.H. White, *The Once and Future King*, 1939.

The man who spoke those words was King Arthur's tutor—Arthur of Camelot—and like all master teachers in every time and place, he was a magician

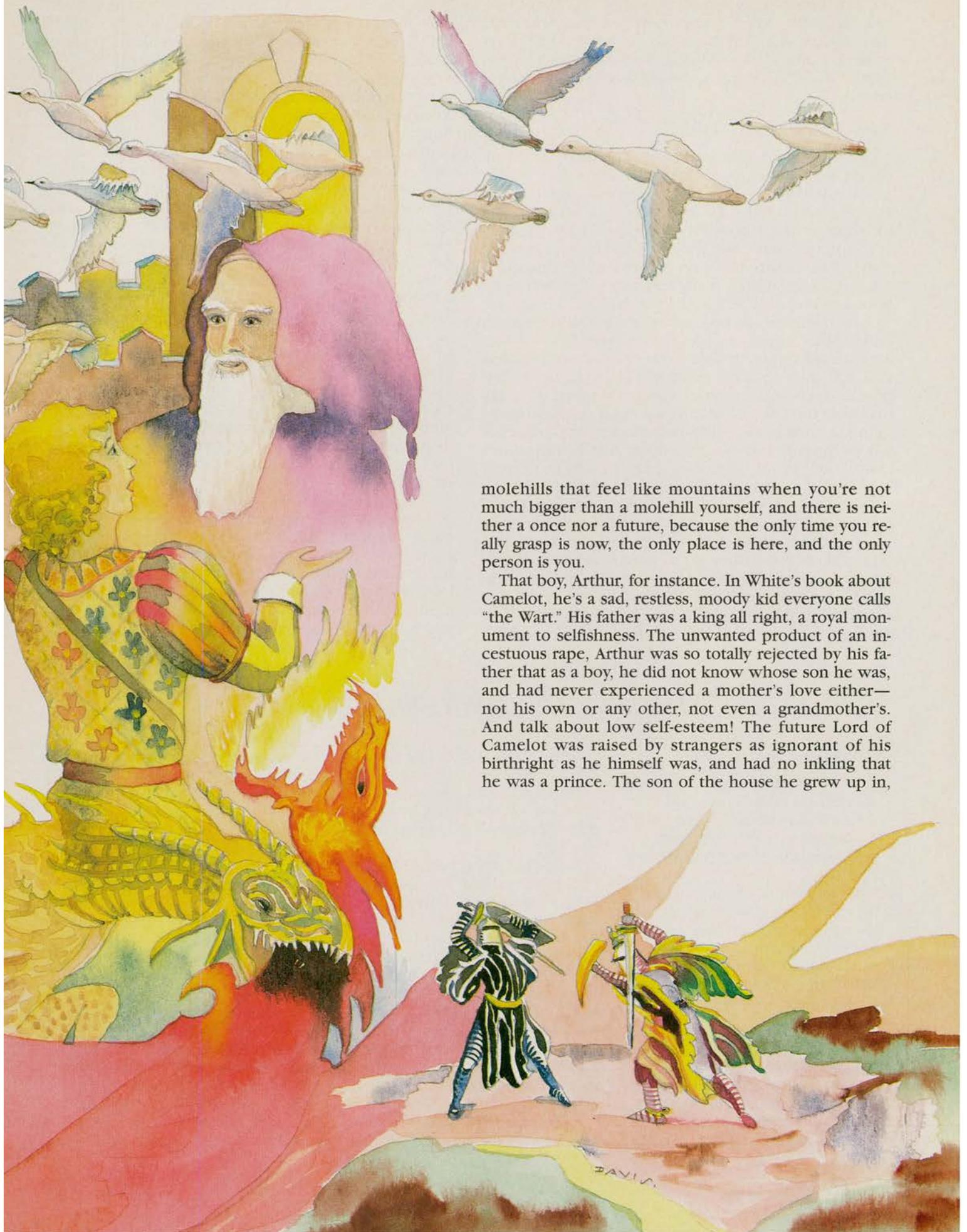
too. Magicians transform things, and Merlyn's great trick was transforming sadness into fascination and joy. And like so many teachers today, he had his work cut out for him. Then as now, there was a lot of sadness to transform. Many of Merlyn's students were troubled kids from broken homes, kids who had experienced rejection, neglect, and worse. Kids who were menaced by the promiscuity and violence all around them.

And of course, in addition to all those big reasons for being sad, all of Merlyn's kids also had all the small reasons the young always have. All the wrong-shoes

Barbara Lerner, a psychologist and attorney, is president of Lerner Associates, a research and consulting firm in Princeton, New Jersey. Copyright © 1996 by Barbara Lerner.

ILLUSTRATED BY SUSAN DAVIS





molehills that feel like mountains when you're not much bigger than a molehill yourself, and there is neither a once nor a future, because the only time you really grasp is now, the only place is here, and the only person is you.

That boy, Arthur, for instance. In White's book about Camelot, he's a sad, restless, moody kid everyone calls "the Wart." His father was a king all right, a royal monument to selfishness. The unwanted product of an incestuous rape, Arthur was so totally rejected by his father that as a boy, he did not know whose son he was, and had never experienced a mother's love either—not his own or any other, not even a grandmother's. And talk about low self-esteem! The future Lord of Camelot was raised by strangers as ignorant of his birthright as he himself was, and had no inkling that he was a prince. The son of the house he grew up in,

the constant companion of his youth, was in training to be a knight when Merlyn came on the scene, and Arthur was sadly preparing to be his groom. What other job, after all, could fate have in store for an abandoned child with no responsible relatives and no money?

New Magic Versus Old

Confronted by this sad boy today, many teachers would set to work to try to apply the magic of this post-modern age of ours—psychology—using the therapeutic approach that has been common in classrooms for three decades now. General support for rigorous academic standards like the ones endorsed in the last issue of this magazine notwithstanding, with a child like Arthur, especially, many teachers would feel duty-bound to make the lessons of the day take a back seat to his problems, letting curriculum and discipline slide. They would concentrate instead on raising Arthur's self-esteem because they care about troubled kids and want to make them feel better, and because post-modern psychologists have convinced teachers that until they do, these kids won't be ready to learn. To get Arthur ready, these post-modern psychologists tell us, teachers should encourage him to talk about himself and about his troubles, urging him to express himself and to share his feelings as freely as possible.

Of course, they should teach science and math and history and literature too—they are teachers, after all—but the focus should stay on Arthur himself, and on whatever material seems to have some sort of obvious, immediate relevance to his own life, real or fantasized. The main goal, the priority aim, whatever the ostensible topic, should be to help him develop a more positive sense of self and to that end, teachers

should lavish praise on everything he says and does, and emphasize lessons that are flattering to him and to his ancestors, teaching him to take undiluted pride in himself and his heritage, however he defines it.

Merlyn didn't do that. He could have, easily; he understood the boy and cared about him, and he knew all along that Arthur was a prince, but he didn't tell him that, not until Arthur was grown. And by then, Arthur didn't need to hear it from Merlyn. He had already proved that he was as fit to lead as he was to follow, first to himself and then to everyone around him. He was, as it turned out, the one person in the kingdom that became Camelot who could pull the magic sword loose from the stone. And everyone sang his praises when he did.

But Merlyn didn't prepare Arthur to perform that feat by building his self-esteem. He didn't focus on Arthur's self at all, and he didn't let the boy stay focused on it for long. Instead, he followed the advice he gave in the opening words of this article. He said: "The best thing for being sad is to learn," and that's what he made Arthur do, insisting, from the start, that Arthur focus in hard on learning, so hard that he totally lost himself in it. And in doing that, Merlyn taught the boy to transcend the self and all its sorrows, leaving his own lonely heart, lousy prospects, and wounded ego far behind.

That was Merlyn's magic, the old magic of teaching and learning. Not the in-passing, by-the-way, among-other-things, peripheral-vision kind of learning that became the norm in so many post-modern classrooms, but the sort of focused, concentrated, full-attention learning that absorbs you so completely that it lifts you right up out of yourself and your own situation, taking you to another place entirely, plunking you down in

AH, SWEET MYSTERY OF IRRELEVANCE

BY EDMUND JANKO

I DON'T KNOW when relevance in education was invented, but it sure wasn't around when I was in elementary school 50 or so years ago. And I say, "Thank goodness!"

When I walked to school in Maspeth, N.Y., every morning on the other side of the railroad tracks, I saw strings of grimy box-cars leaking dirty straw and a line of soot-blackened factories with a lot of punched-out windows.

Edmund Janko was a high-school English teacher in New York City for many years. He writes frequently on education issues. This essay first appeared in the Oct. 9, 1991, issue of Education Week and is reprinted with permission.

It was a time when a lot of people on my block, including my parents, talked a lot about hoping to get a few hours of work here and there or maybe catching on with the W.P.A.

So the last thing I wanted when I got to school was a lesson on the crisis of world capitalism or the constitutionality of the National Recovery Act—even if I could have possibly imagined these were the kinds of things that school was supposed to be about.

P.S. 74 back then was a two-story wooden building next to a bakery whose chimneys steeped our classrooms in the comforting, nurturing smell of baking bread.

I remember dreaming over my reader in the afternoon free-read-

ing period, yielding to the lazy, comforting warmth of those lovely kitchen smells. It was just the right atmosphere for irrelevance.

While the dispossessed farmers were making their painful way across the pages of *The Grapes of Wrath*, my mind was on the road to Mandalay, particularly on the "Burma Girl," and I wondered whether she could have looked as good as Henrietta Majeski, who sat across the row two seats away.

And who was this man that she was thinking of? Someone like me, I supposed—a devil-may-care soldier of fortune. And I had no trouble putting my formidable military skills at the service of the British Empire, particularly when it meant serving as a junior ensign with

whole new worlds beyond your own. To worlds you never would have dreamed of if it weren't for books and teachers. The kind of total-immersion, in-depth learning that holds you in thrall until the bell rings, then returns you to yourself—an enlarged self, enriched and empowered by new perspectives and a whole new range of possibilities. At least, that's how I see Merlyn's lessons, but that's not how Arthur experienced them.

To Arthur, as T.H. White shows us in *The Once and Future King*, Merlyn's lessons were pure adventures. The boy had been splashing aimlessly about in the shallows of life, bored and restless and unhappy, when Merlyn picked him up and dropped him right into the moat, making him dive deep down into the murky waters where he learned to swim with the flighty fish, half-blind and often foolish, forgetting his own fears by understanding theirs, and learning to soothe them. And when he was back on dry land again, Merlyn taught Arthur to burrow deep into the earth, dropping him first among the ants, a brainwashed bunch, slaving away in a totalitarian world suffused with propaganda about the glories of their grim world and the all-powerful boss ant they all bowed down to. And when Arthur had experienced what it was like to be trapped in that world and wanted out, Merlyn sent him back down into the earth again, but this time, he paired him up with the badgers, industrious, self-directed craftsmen and master builders in a world they were forever remaking. And when the boy had lived in their world and absorbed some of its lessons, Merlyn sent him soaring high above the earth, flying free in the wind, in the exhilarating company of the wild geese, streaking across the sky on democracy's long journey.

At least, that's how Arthur experienced Merlyn's

lessons. But of course, it was really science and math and history and literature that he was filling Arthur's moody head with, and it distanced Arthur from the sorrows of his youth, giving him some much-needed relief from sadness and a taste of joy. It taught him to lose himself in learning, and that stood him in good stead all through his life because, as Merlyn knew from the start, sorrow is never a stranger for long, not even to kings, not even in Camelot. And Merlyn's lessons were more than a psychic balm to Arthur's soul. They had great practical utility too because, as Merlyn also knew, all our worlds are always in danger of crumbling down around us, always in need of remaking, rebuilding and creating anew.

Merlyn's approach was dominant in American classrooms for a long time, and it served our students—and their teachers—well. School standards and test scores were higher then, and pathology rates were lower. There was less crime and delinquency, less violence, addiction and illegitimacy; more hard, focused work, and more joy in it.

Teachers were not insensitive to their student's feelings and attitudes—far from it—but, like Merlyn, they believed first and foremost in both the practical and transcendent power of knowledge. Teaching and learning, they felt, constituted not only the unique contribution they could bring to their young charges but perhaps the best therapy as well.

That was in the 1940s, '50s, and '60s, before the post-modern psychology of the 1970s swallowed up modern psychology and most of education too, and began nibbling away at religion. Post-modern psychology reduced every problem in life to a question of self-esteem or the lack of it, blurring the boundaries between therapy and school, diluting both, and making

Commodore Hornblower beating to quarters somewhere off Cape Trafalgar. I never really understood why he had it in for the French, but knew I wanted to be on his side.

My teachers never worked at trying to develop my social conscience. They just gave me books. The things I read in public school broke down the Depression walls of my neighborhood and gave me a sense of a larger world.

I can't help but admire the daring of my teachers, who thought that they could draw a scruffy crew like us into the upper-crust circle of James Matthew Barrie's ironic comedies. Maybe it was the only hook they had, a left-over from the '20s, but I can still remember the poignant sense of the

unfairness of life I felt when the Admirable Crichton had to return downstairs to the butler's pantry after all he did on the deserted island for Lord Loam and his family.

And how could the paltry burden of my poverty compare with his noble sacrifice of giving up Lady Mary? I never gave a thought to the class system or whatever. It was just the way life was, not getting what you wanted or deserved, even in fairy tales.

All of us kids sensed that the school was trying to refine us, though we never felt patronized. No one was ever offended when our teachers looked at our nails or in our ears to see if they were clean. We were anxious to measure up, to be uplifted.

Every Friday we had music ap-

preciation. I never knew what was pomp and what was circumstance or why someone who must have been very religious to be called Saint-Saëns wrote music for skeletons to dance to. But I never doubted that it all had to do with something of what being a grownup was all about—something beautiful and mysterious, some puzzle that I might unravel some day.

It all was a little taste of some larger feast, and it helped ease the fear that must have nagged at all of us: that our lives would never get beyond those dreary boxcars and punched-out factory windows.

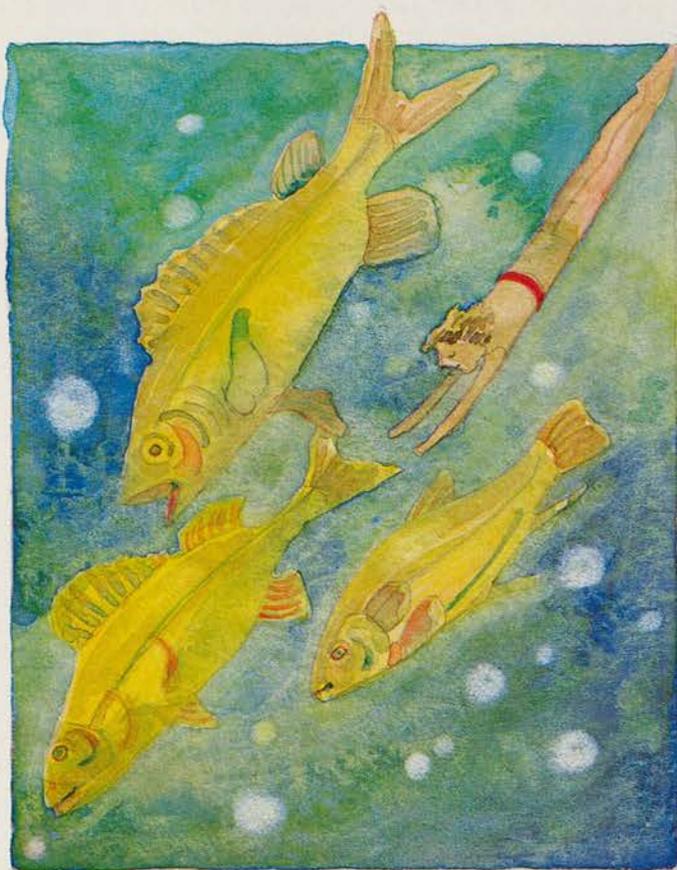
Elementary school told us that there was something else, after all. □

education a subservient profession. It mandated a new therapeutic approach to teaching, an approach that made a relentless focus on the self the order of the day in classrooms across the land.

Focus on the kids, not the subject matter, post-modern psychologists and their allies in the education bureaucracies told teachers; build their self-esteem and make them feel good about themselves. Don't expect them to get really absorbed in anything beyond themselves or to meet any external standards that seem foreign to them at the outset. Emphasize only those lessons that are of immediate relevance to them, and make sure they are easy enough for all students to succeed all the time, instantly, with no great effort on their part. And of course, feed them all a steady diet of praise, whether they are 3 or 13, and never criticize them. Don't tell them that there are standards and they're not meeting them yet. Don't tell them they have to work harder, dig deeper. Tell them that whatever they're doing is terrific already, and make them feel good now, immediately. That will build their self-esteem, and make them all happy and smart and good, all those non-teaching post-modern experts told teachers.

I call that the Self-Esteem-Now theory of educational and human development, and a lot of conscientious teachers tried hard to act in accordance with it in the past 30 years. The results were dismal—kids learned less, respect for teachers declined, disorder and violence and unhappiness increased, and a lot of Americans lost faith in schools and respect for teachers. A lot of teachers lost faith in themselves too, and in the healing and life-transforming potential of their own profession's magic, Merlyn's magic—the ancient, venerable, once and future magic of teaching and learning. The kind of teaching and learning that can only take place when standards are high and misguided notions about self-esteem are not allowed to trump them.

The renewed standards movement of the '90s gives today's teachers a chance to reclaim that magic and new backing to put it into practice, but there are still plenty of obstacles ahead, and post-modern psychology is one of the biggest. It gets its power from the enormous influence it has had, not just on teachers and on education bureaucrats and administrators, but on parents, and on lawyers and judges too, and of



course, on politicians—all the non-teaching “experts” who have been making rules for teachers and schools for the last three decades. Sooner or later, most teachers who raise standards and teach hard, as Merlyn did, will be confronted by angry critics who believe that self-esteem should continue to take priority over standards.

In coping with criticism of this sort, it helps to remember that psychology itself is not the enemy of high standards; the post-modern psychology of self-esteem is the problem. In coping with it, and answering criticism from its spear-carriers, it helps to look back to the psychology post-modern “experts” left behind when they embraced Self-Esteem-Now as the answer to all of life's problems. That older psychology took a much more complex and differentiated view of human development, and a much more re-

spectful view of the role of education in fostering it. It recognized the fact that self-esteem has a dark side, and that too much of the wrong kind at the wrong ages can be even more destructive in its impact than too little. [For a discussion of the relationship between inflated self-esteem and violence, see the article by Roy Baumeister on page 14.]

I tried to help teachers look at that older psychology in the pages of this magazine almost a dozen years ago, distilling out the essence of two of those older theories, then analyzing data and making predictions based on them, predictions that were the opposite of those made by Self-Esteem-Now theorists. But one dissenting voice wasn't loud enough to counter the mighty chorus of self-esteem salesmen of the 1980s. In the '90s, however, things are looking up. Now, at last, many voices are joining in, questioning post-modern ideas about self-esteem and recognizing some of the destructive effects they have had on our schools, our kids, and our lives. Skepticism is now so widespread that even the popular press is beginning to reflect it, as *Newsweek* did in its May 29, 1995, cover story.

The editor of this magazine has seen fit to reprint that 1985 article of mine in this issue. It's called “Self-Esteem and Excellence: The Choice and the Paradox,” and it begins again on the next page. We both hope it will help all of us to do just that: begin again, and bring the best of the timeless past back to the future. □