



INTERVIEW

MARTIN SELIGMAN

How to make friends and win presidential elections:
Try a little optimism

Healers of the psyche from Freud to the present have taken the accurate perception of "self" to be a hallmark of mental health. Not psychologist Martin Seligman, researcher and director of clinical training at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia, who has achieved fame—and some infamy—by attacking the sacred cows of his profession. A key function of Seligman-style therapy is teaching the art of self-deception. Not that he's advocating obese people reinvent themselves as skinny, or paupers millionaires. Such gross distortions, he'd be the first to admit, are dangerous. What Seligman advocates are subtle, self-aggrandizing lies that foster the illusion that we can achieve positive outcomes in our lives.

Virtually all children and most well-adjusted adults, Seligman's studies reveal, regularly twist reality in a positive direction. He and other investigators have linked these optimistic distortions to greater happiness, achievement, and health. Those who fail to so benignly delude themselves are more prone, they claim, to suffer from depression, lack of productivity, and illness.

A family tragedy, Seligman reveals, shaped his intellectual interests. At 13, he saw his father, a prominent Albany lawyer, stricken by a stroke just after he'd decided to run for high public office. Never regaining his health, his father slipped quickly into being a wheelchair-bound invalid whose moods vacillated wildly between desperation and euphoria. The experience introduced his son to the suffering helplessness engenders.

PHOTOGRAPH BY
PETER LIEPKE



RECENTLY WRITTEN:

Learned Optimism

WHAT OPTIMISTS HAVE:

Self-serving illusions enabling them to maintain good cheer and health in a universe that is essentially indifferent to their welfare

WHAT PESSIMISTS HAVE:

Logical consistency, a truer assessment of reality

OPTIMISM AND THE PRESIDENCY:

Optimists win more; the greatest presidents were more pessimistic.

SELF-SCORE:

Pessimist. "But I'd like to think the edge it gives me on realism is an advantage as a scientist. Only a pessimist could write a serious book on how to become a flexible optimist."

A graduate student in psychology at the University of Pennsylvania in 1964, Seligman decided to focus on the role of motivation in mental illness. As a newcomer, he found the psych lab in a state of commotion. "Something's wrong with the dogs—they won't do anything," exclaimed a young researcher. Seligman soon learned that the animals had been subjects in a Pavlovian conditioning trial when their paralysis set in. The dogs were initially presented with a tone, followed by a mild but inescapable shock. Several trials led them to associate that sound with imminent punishment. They were then given the same tone in a new chamber. Here they could easily escape the shock by simply jumping over a low partition. But far from learning to avoid the punishment, the dogs responded to the tone

by lying down and whimpering.

No stranger to the symptoms of despair, Seligman instantly grasped what was happening: Repeated exposure to inescapable shock "taught" the dogs that nothing they did would make any difference. What Seligman was proposing was heresy. Cornering him at a men's-room urinal after a lecture, a leading proponent of Skinner chastised him. "Animals don't think *anything*; they only behave!" But Seligman forged ahead, convinced that his animal model might explain the sense of helplessness at the core of human depression.

Working with Steve Maier, he repeated and extended earlier studies in learned helplessness now considered landmarks in the field. A key finding of these experiments, however, is that a small percentage of the animals never became passive in the face of adversity. In later studies, a corresponding minority of human subjects also refused to learn to be helpless.

In search of what distinguishes individuals who defy the odds from people who readily succumb, Seligman focused on how people explain good and bad events in their lives. Those who spring back from upsets, he saw, have an optimistic explanatory style often containing delusional components. They tend to overestimate their attractiveness, talents, and other goal-achieving abilities while discounting responsibility for losses and failure. People prone to despair have a pessimistic explanatory style marked by brutal honesty. Neither inclined toward grandiosity nor to seeing themselves especially charmed against life's ills, they are in Seligman's words, "at the mercy of reality."

These insights have found a broad range of applications outside of therapy. Seligman's Attributional Style Questionnaire [ASQ] ranks individuals on an optimism-pessimism scale. In a longitudinal study of school children, those scoring highest for pessimism were most likely to later suffer depression. High scores for optimism are predictive of excellence in everything from sports to life-insurance sales (a finding that saved Metropolitan Life millions of dollars in personnel selection). And optimism wins votes as well. Analyzing campaign speeches for the prevalence of optimism, Seligman predicted the winners of the 1988 presidential and Senate elections more accurately than veteran political forecasters. His groups have also ranked the November candidates' "optimism quotients."

How can desperados acquire the stuff of hope? Seligman delineates a detailed program in his best seller, *Learned Optimism*. Twice recognized

by the American Psychological Association for distinguished contributions to the field, Seligman was recently singled out for a rare merit award by the National Institute of Mental Health. While fetching yet another award in Washington recently, he met with interviewer Kathleen McAuliffe. After several months of conversation, Seligman broached his latest preoccupation: Just how much can we transform ourselves through the tools of psychology?

Omni: Is contemporary psychotherapy's basic goal—the deepest understanding of self—a misguided goal?

Seligman: When I first trained to become a therapist 20 years ago, I was an agent of both truth and happiness. That's still a central premise of most therapists. But research in our lab and others is increasingly challenging that view. Most commonly, people come to me for treatment of depression. Depressed people, seeing the world much more accurately than happy people, are better at gauging their talent and ability in a given situation.

If a pessimist gets 20 out of 40 questions right in a lab test, and I ask him, "How'd you do?" he'll answer 20 right, 20 wrong. Pose that question to an optimist: The answer is, "I got 30 right and 10 wrong." Even when offered a monetary incentive for accuracy, optimists consistently overestimate their ability. Optimists have a set of self-serving illusions that enable them to maintain good cheer and health in a universe essentially indifferent to their welfare.

Insight therapy—with its emphasis on dredging up unpleasant truths about the past—can sometimes backfire with severely depressed patients. Some individuals become totally unraveled. Good therapy for depression may entail bolstering a set of benign illusions. Depressed people may need to adopt the same self-serving illusions that most normal people hold.

Omni: Optimists may distort reality positively, but surely when pessimism mushrooms into full-blown depression, isn't there just as much negative distortion?

Seligman: I'm sure many therapists would agree with you. Severely depressed patients who are millionaires may think they're penniless. I've treated beautiful men and women who thought they were ugly. But if you take these same individuals into a lab and test them, one finds profoundly depressed people are accurate.

Omni: Even if that's true, is it ethical or wise for therapists to send the message to patients: To thine own self be false?

Seligman: Poet R. P. Blackmuir said that poetry gives us the lie we need to

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INTERVIEW

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stay alive. One of my roles is to bolster the illusions making life bearable. What I hear from patients is, "I'm going to kill myself unless my life gets better." My contract is to teach them skills making them want to live so that they don't spend half their lives crying.

Omni: Tell me about your vocation as a political forecaster.

Seligman: In 1988, I and my graduate student, Harold Zullo, a political junky, decided to test whether optimism was a factor influencing the Senate races. There were 33 senatorial races and we were able to get the stump speeches of 29 of the 33 candidates. We content-analyzed the speeches for optimism or pessimism and sent our predictions in sealed envelopes to the *New York Times*. By choosing the most optimistic candidates as the winners, we were able to predict 25 of 29 races, including five out of six upsets. We did better than any other forecaster.

Omni: Your predictions were based on a single criterion, optimism, whereas other forecasters and pollsters employed multiple criteria, such as candidates' views, race, religion, and other factors supposedly central to who wins.

Seligman: There's a huge unpolled "hope factor" in the American electorate. People listen for who inspires the most hope. We vote for leaders who make us feel the future is going to be better. Harold and I also looked at the 22 presidential elections from 1900 to 1984 and rated the optimism of the Republican and Democratic nominees. We cut out every sentence of their nomination acceptance speeches, put it on an index card, and had blind raters—individuals who did not know whether the words came from Kennedy, Taft, or Johnson—rank the statement for optimism on a 1-to-7 scale. In 18 out of 22 elections, the more optimistic candidate won. There were four exceptions in the twentieth century, three of which were Roosevelt elections, and the fourth was the Nixon-Humphrey race in 1968.

Omni: Humphrey was more optimistic than Nixon?

Seligman: Yes, but after the Chicago riots, Humphrey had to overcome a 16-percent point deficit in the polls and closed within one-half of 1 percent. People say that if the campaign had gone on for one more week, Humphrey would have won.

Omni: How did a pessimist like Roosevelt get elected three times?

Seligman: I just have a guess. Those elections occurred during deep crisis

years. In 1936, the nation was still in a profound depression. In 1940, the war is breaking out in Europe. In 1944, we're on the verge of victory. During extreme crises, optimism is diffused and there's a tendency to stay with a proven leader.

Omni: What are your predictions for the upcoming elections?

Seligman: We're analyzing the optimism of Bush and Clinton as well as leading House, Senate, and gubernatorial candidates. We'll open our sealed envelope the day before the election.

Omni: Why the day before?

Seligman: We don't want to influence the candidates' styles on the long shot that they'd take our analysis seriously and change their speeches to sound more optimistic.

Omni: Any hints as to what predictions are in that envelope?

Seligman: Nothing I'll say at this point except that both presidential candidates have had careers marked by remarkable ups and downs. So we're probably dealing with strong optimists here.

Omni: Have campaign managers flocked to you for advice?

Seligman: After we called so many primaries correctly in the last election, the *New York Times* ran a front-page story about us. Immediately we got letters from both parties' campaign people asking us, "What's this all about?" and "Can you help us write more optimistic speeches?" To oblige them, we could take any speech by any candidate and make it more appealing to the electorate by, among other things, changing many adjectives. We did not want to assist in masking candidates' real positions, yet they were taxpayers entitled to the information. So we just sent them reprints of our work with the hope that they wouldn't believe us and, at least for a while, would forget about us.

Omni: Are you afraid your findings will turn political campaigns into issueless pageantries in which each opponent tries to outdo the other for the rosier vision of the future?

Seligman: If politicians are flagrantly abusing this to deceive the electorate, we can expose them by comparing press conferences and off-the-cuff remarks with prepared speeches. It's hard to fake optimism when you don't have a written text in front of you. We'd try to educate the public about bunk. It's a bridge we haven't yet had to cross. I hope we never do.

Omni: Given the problems the world faces, don't we need pessimists in office more than at any time in history?

Seligman: You may be right. We've analyzed over a century of inaugural addresses going back to Andrew Jackson

and compared each president's optimism ranking to history's rating of his greatness. What gets you elected is sounding like an optimist, but what correlates with greatness is pessimism. The most pessimistic of the presidents managed to get elected by narrow margins but went on to be rated great. Lincoln, FDR, and Truman can be counted in that group. Very optimistic presidents were not, by and large, the great ones.

Omni: Was Reagan the most optimistic in the bunch?

Seligman: No, he's far from our most optimistic president. Eisenhower was more optimistic; George Bush is more optimistic.

Omni: How is pessimism valuable in other occupations?

Seligman: In a big corporation, optimism may be an asset for marketeers, sales persons, and creative people dreaming up new products. But pessimism definitely has a place when it comes to safety engineers, CPAs, financial vice presidents, and others we depend on to raise the yellow flag of caution. And at the top, a company needs a CEO who can balance the jeremiads of pessimists against the charge-ahead optimists. Presidents and other political leaders must do the same thing.

Omni: To function well in society, then, don't people need a good dose of realism?

Seligman: Realism is much a part of the way we need and want to live. But it's a fallacy to assume that virtues cannot be antagonistic. Optimism provides virtues: It fights depression, causes more achievement in the work place, may be a factor in better health. But it has a cost: We don't see the world aright. The psychiatrist prescribing lithium for manic depression may be placing that patient at greater risk of heart dysfunction. Life is buying and selling. The notion that therapy can produce global gains in every arena is an illusion. The clash between truth and happiness has not really penetrated the consciousness of mainstream psychologists.

Omni: And when it does?

Seligman: Society places a high premium on truth. The conflict will make many therapists uncomfortable. But there are ways around the dilemma. It used to be if you were born a pessimist, you were a slave to that catastrophic outlook for life. Likewise for optimists and a rosy-eyed vision of reality, even when a more sober-headed view might be advantageous. But we needn't be slaves to either outlook; we can choose how we think. Styles of thinking can become

habits. We can control our thoughts as we can our muscles.

When do we deploy these thinking strategies? We must ask ourselves what are the consequences of failing in a situation. Say you've called up someone you want to interview, but she won't return your calls. Should you call again? The cost of failure is small, just a rebuff. Say there's someone you want to approach at a party. Should you go up and introduce yourself? Again, the cost of failure is negligible. But if you're debating whether or not to have an affair that could ruin your marriage if your spouse found out, then it's time for pessimism. You want to look at reality very clearly in this situation.

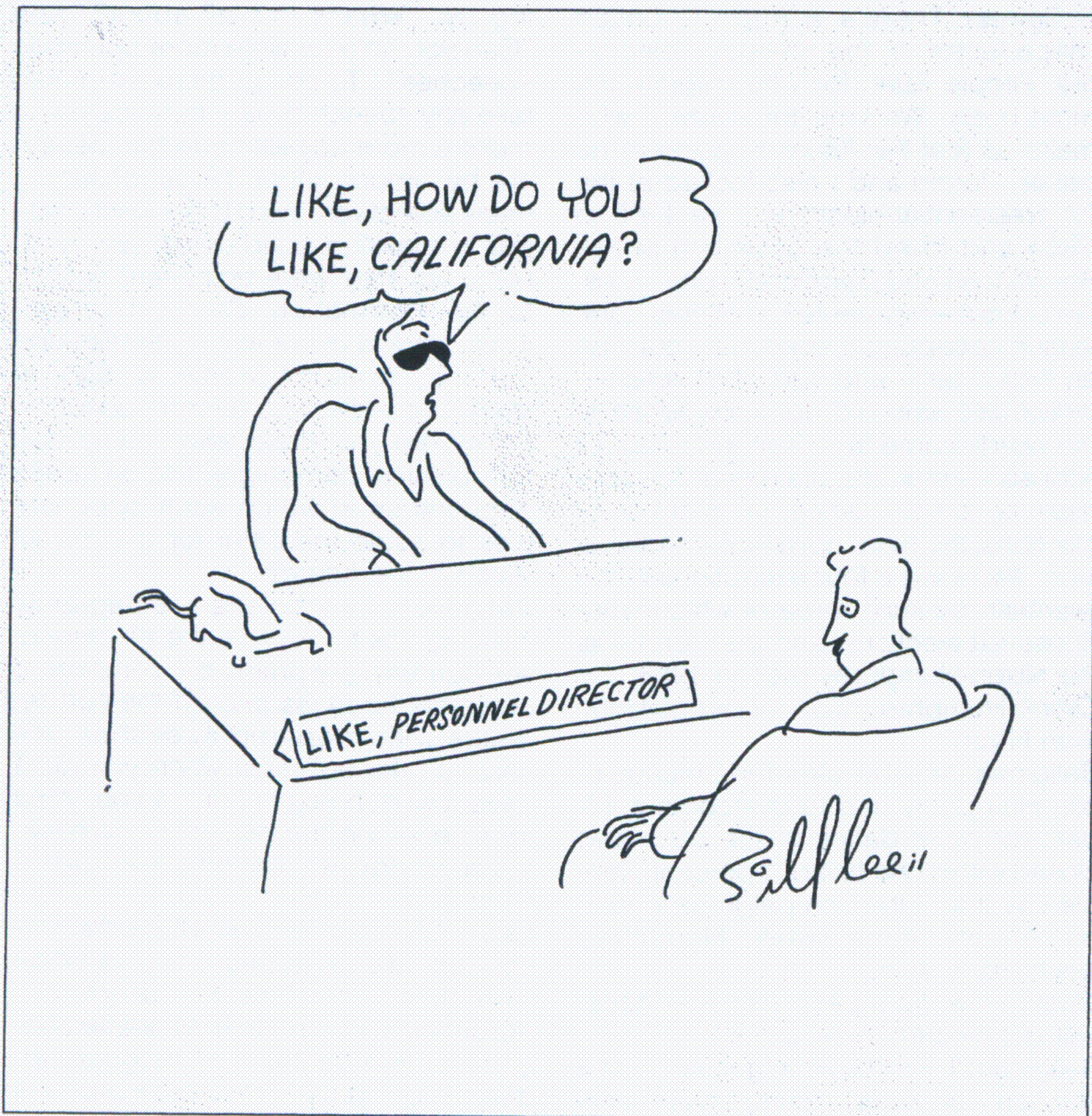
Omni: So a person can flip back and forth between strategies?

Seligman: I do, and my patients claim to be able to do so. That's hardly evidence. But consider how readily you switch back and forth between home, party, and office behavior. Different skills and thinking are involved in each, yet most people switch between personal, affiliative, and achievement modes so readily, they're not aware of how drastically they've changed.

My animal studies in learned helplessness have convinced me that learning underlies pessimism. What baffled me was the minority of subjects who kept trying to avoid the shock. One in three dogs refused to give in to helplessness—as did one in three rats, goldfish, and cockroaches. When I gave humans unsolvable problems, again one in three did not become helpless. About 15 years ago, I began to wonder why. I soon discovered that not all people think about triumphs and defeats the same way.

Optimists, it turns out, have a lopsided view of the universe that makes them resistant to defeat. If something is good, optimists think they did it; the positive effects will affect everything else they try; the goodness will last forever. If something bad happens, they're not to blame; the failure won't affect anything else they try; the negative effects will be fleeting. Optimists have exactly the opposite explanations of good and bad events.

Pessimists are more logically consistent. They subscribe to the same view of causality for good and bad events. They take credit for successes, but are just as even-handed about taking responsibility for defeat. While the optimist sees himself as very special, the pessimist views himself as an outsider might. Consequently, pessimists have fewer means of defending themselves, which is probably the reason they're more vulnerable to feelings of helplessness.



ness and depression.

Omni: Has optimism research been wrongly derided as pop psychology, armchair theorizing?

Seligman: If we're dealing with armchair theorizing, it's armchair theory in which roughly 400,000 subjects have participated and roughly 400 doctoral dissertations have been written. Numerous studies show these concepts have strong predictive capacity in several areas. Our Attributional Style Questionnaire ranks individuals on an optimism-pessimism scale based on how the person explains a series of vignettes in which good and bad events occur. If we test people and track them over time, we can predict who is going to get depressed and stay depressed. The higher the optimism score, the less likely the individual will become depressed. If the person does become depressed, their recovery is quicker.

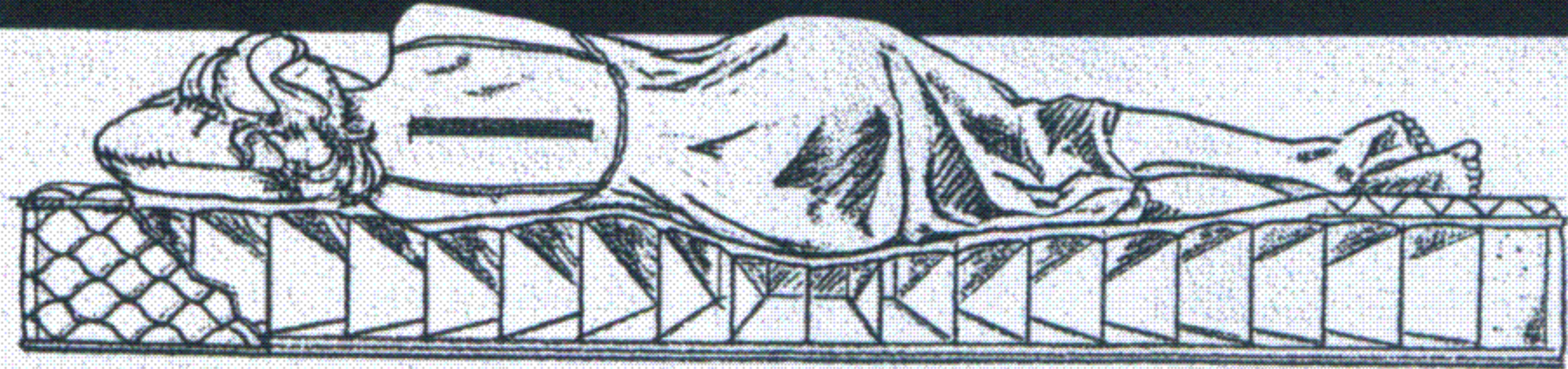
We can take people with the same SAT scores and grade-point averages in high school and predict who will do better in college. Optimists do better, exceeding the performance level predicted by standard academic indicators; pessimists do worse. In business, I've tested 300,000 candidates for jobs as insurance salesmen. Working in a field where 9 out of 10 people slam a door in your face, optimists don't quit in large numbers the way pessimists do, and they sell many more policies. I've also tested Olympic swimmers. When defeated, the optimists swam the next race faster; the pessimists more slowly.

In physical health, optimists are more resistant to infectious illness and are better at fending off chronic diseases of middle age. In one study, we looked at 96 men who had their first heart attack in 1980. Within eight years, 15 of the 16 most pessimistic men died of a second heart attack, but only five of the 16 most optimistic men died. These concepts are far from armchair theorizing. A lot of what I do is armchair theorizing, but very little of what I publish is armchair theorizing.

Omni: Many medical authorities still doubt that we can wish away disease with positive thinking.

Seligman: Skepticism is always healthy in science. But some experts, such as Marcia Angell, executive editor of the *New England Journal of Medicine*, have taken their skepticism too far. In my view, people who draw a line between mental and physical processes are living in the seventeenth century. We are not evoking mystical forces to explain how mind effects body. No, we can't observe a billiard ball called *pessimism* hit a billiard ball called an *en-*

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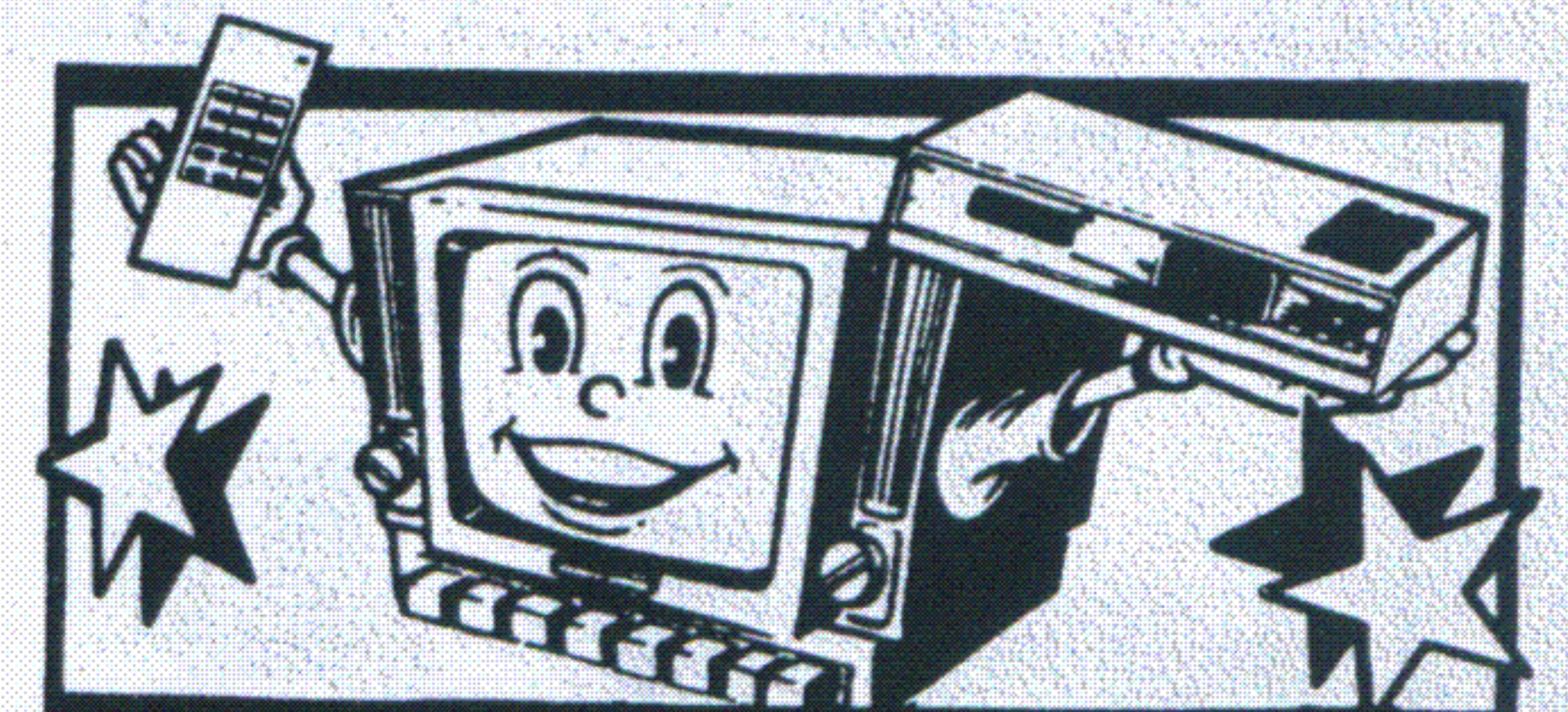


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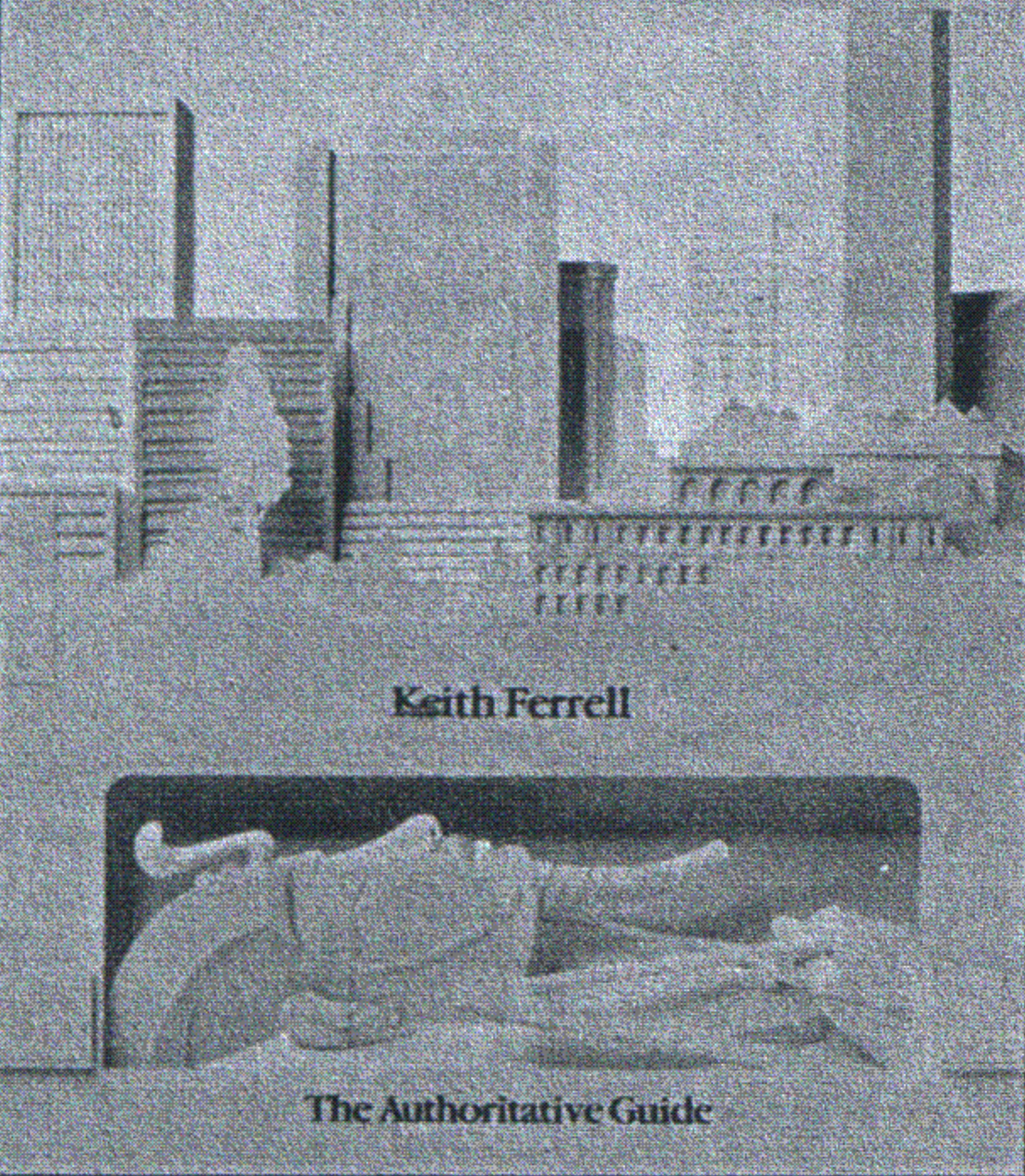
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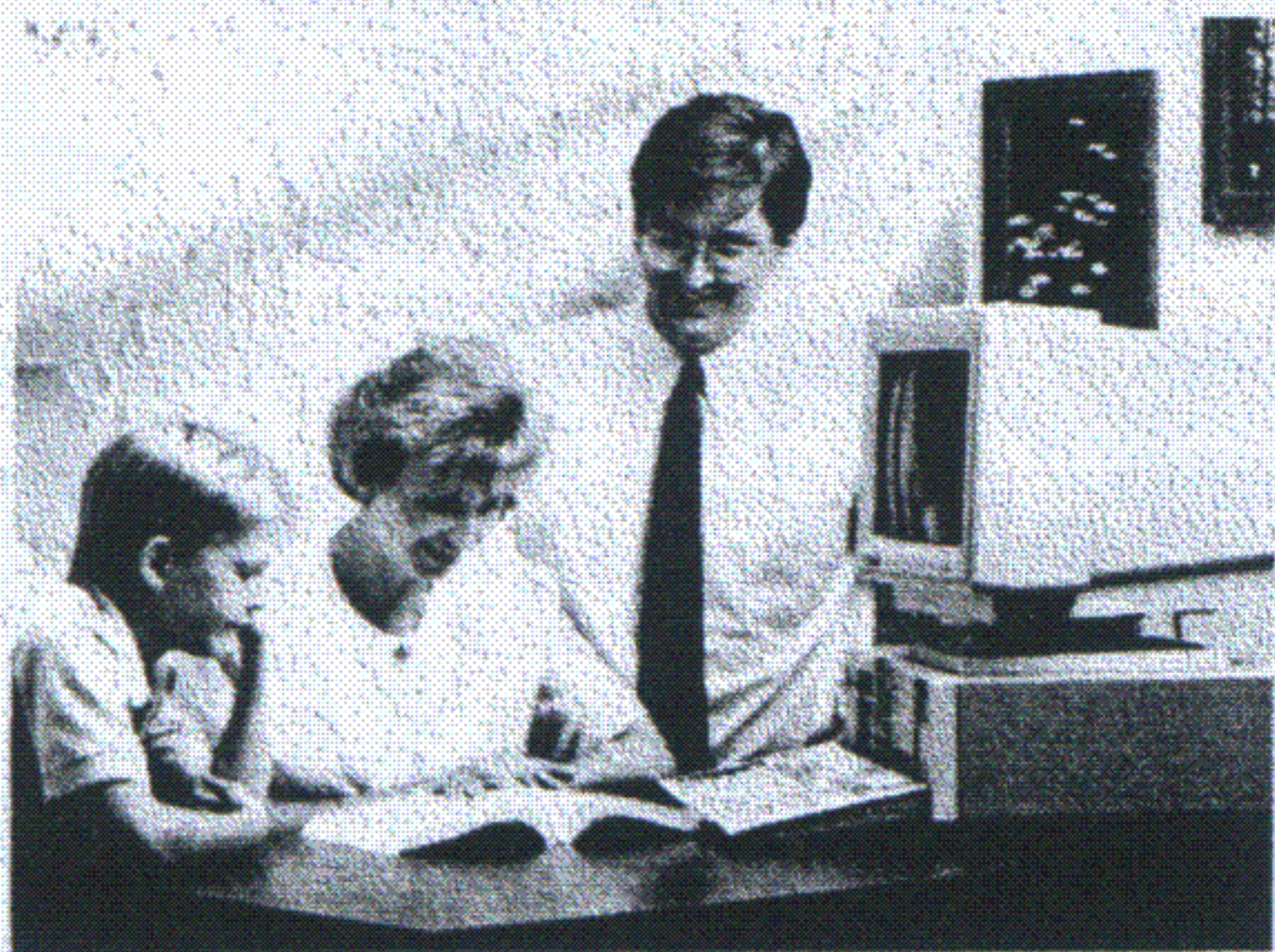
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dolphin that knocks into a billiard ball called *immune shutdown*. But we can measure substantial statistical relationships among those variables, which is how discoveries in other areas of medicine are made.

Omni: How do you teach a clinically depressed person flexible optimism?

Seligman: Optimism is not a panacea for depression. It often makes sense to give severely depressed patients antidepressant drugs initially to lift their mood so you can work with them. Then, they'll be more receptive to learning the skills to counteract pessimistic thinking at the core of their depression. Unlike intelligence, femininity, and many other traits, pessimism can be changed greatly by learning.

The most effective skill for fighting depression is disputing. Unfortunately, it's a skill we often apply in the wrong places. We dispute other people, external sources. To overcome depression, we have to learn to dispute ourselves! Pessimistic people often think negative thoughts about themselves, many of which are irrational. They may be internalizing rantings of their big sister or punitive Little League coach. Learning optimism means learning how to dispute catastrophic thoughts and replace them with self-enhancing thoughts.

Omni: A little advice for the gloomy?

Seligman: Specifically, if something goes wrong, pessimists tend to have hopeless thoughts. They tell themselves, "I'll never get it right," or "I always screw up," or worse, they stamp themselves with a negative label—"I'm a jerk." My goal would be to get that person to speak to him- or herself more kindly, the way a loving friend might. The person might learn to say, "Things didn't go well today, but I learned a lot from the experience, and I'll do better tomorrow." Instead of negative labels like "jerk," the pessimist would learn to say, "Sometimes I'm not as considerate as I'd like to be, but overall, I'm a kind person."

My other advice for overcoming pessimism is not to ruminate about bad events that happen to you, at least not immediately afterwards. If your boss fires you or you fail an important exam, my recommendation is to do something pleasurable that will distract you from your troubles. I recommend fun distraction because studies show if you think about problems in a negative frame of mind, you come up with fewer solutions. And you're likely to spiral into deeper depression. By boosting mood and self-esteem, people with pessimistic tendencies can break that cycle and free themselves to think more creatively.

Now, a lot of self-improvement ther-

apies don't work. Dieting doesn't work. Diets are no fun. But disputing negative thoughts and avoiding rumination makes you feel better immediately. It's fun. It takes most people a few weeks to get the knack, but once the technique is learned, the less likely they are to relapse. That's well documented.

Omni: Is the self-improvement movement a recent phenomenon?

Seligman: To understand its history I've been studying Judeo-Christian tradition. I've been surprised by the lessons implicit in some of the great Biblical events. Let me test you. How did the Jews escape from Egypt?

Omni: Moses, through his faith in God, was able to part the Red Sea. Moses gave the Jews the courage, strength, and faith to believe they could achieve the miraculous.

Seligman: That's what I thought, too. But we're both wrong. That interpretation has a distinct twentieth-century spin. God really does everything—that's why the Jews are exhorted to remember the Exodus. Moses isn't inspirational. God appears before him and says, "I'm going to command you to do something. I'm going to put the words in your mouth and tell you what to do every step of the way." The Jews do nothing except groan and complain to God, who commands them, drags them out of Egypt, tells Moses what to do, parts the waters. If you look at the great events described in both Old and New Testaments, the same lesson is beaten home. Human beings are powerless. Only God is powerful.

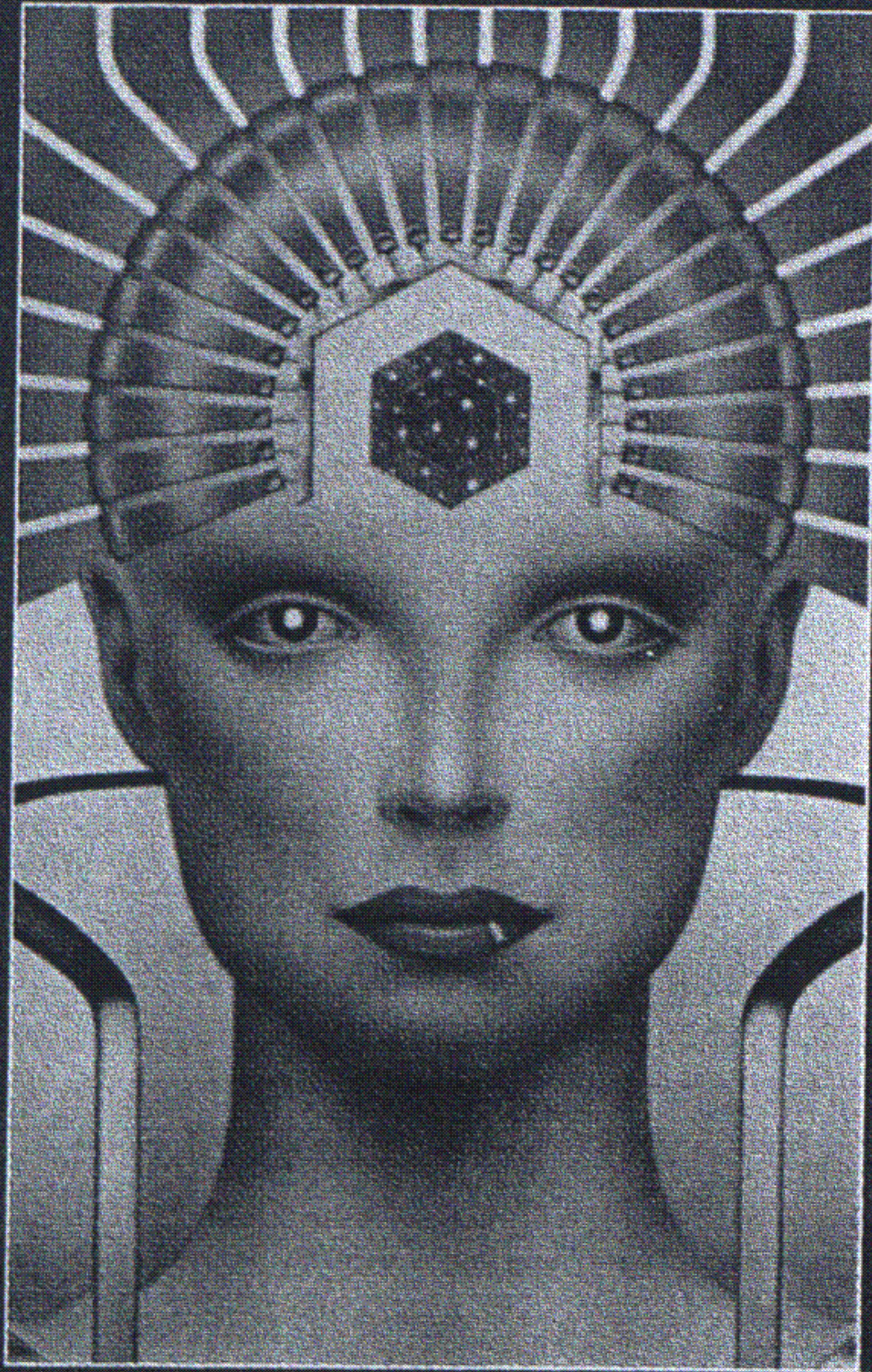
That message dominates Christian thinking up to about 1500. Slowly, however, three movements took root providing the foundations of our modern obsession with self-improvement: the re-discovery of the Greek idea of free will; the birth of modern science in the sixteenth century; and the third, glacially slow, the defeat of monarchs and the rise of self-governing societies. This last begins with the American and French revolutions—their declarations of the independent rights of man—and gains momentum from there.

During the social reforms of 1800 to 1860, the concept of self-improvement arises as a crystallization of these three movements—free will, modern science, and political liberty. Today, we take self-improvement so much for granted, we sometimes forget that there are limits to what we can change about ourselves. A lot of energy is being wasted on self-reform that's destined to fail, such as dieting. A result of constantly dieting is constantly failing, which makes you feel depressed and helpless. But if you actually succeed, you're

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starving, and a regular consequence of starvation is depression. Psychologist Mandy McCarthy, who calls this the vain pursuit of thinness, claims this is why American women are twice as likely to suffer from depression as American men. In cultures that don't idolize thinness, she doesn't find a sex-bias in depression or eating disorders such as bulimia and anorexia.

Omni: What are other examples of vain pursuits?

Seligman: The androgynous person myth—the notion that we can impose masculine and feminine ideals on our children to coincide with what's politically correct this year. You can give dolls to boys and trucks to girls, but don't think it will make boys more nurturing or girls more interested in mechanics. Masculinity and femininity are not very elastic traits. It's an uphill battle. Sexual preference, what turns you on—breasts, bottoms, whatever—appears to be quite fixed, at least once you start acting on it. Perhaps there's a margin of flexibility among teenagers. On the other hand, the quality of being loving, traits such as kindness, compassion, and consideration, is modifiable and worth exploring in therapy.

Omni: How do you envisage psychology advancing over the next century?

Seligman: Therapy will wither as psychology becomes much more useful to well people. Right now, most individuals don't benefit from psychological intervention until they become mentally disturbed. We'll see much greater emphasis on prevention. At the thirtieth anniversary of the polio vaccine, I asked Jonas Salk, "If you were starting out today, what would you want to do?" "I'd still do immunization," he replied, "but it would be psychological rather than biological." That's exactly what I'm engaged in now. I'm launching a program in Philadelphia seeking to teach children proactively the techniques of learned optimism. My goal is to protect them against depression and poor health in adulthood.

In the future, society will be more willing to take an honest look at the biological underpinnings of behavior. There are important biological constraints to what people can and can't learn, can and can't be. By ignoring that fact of life, we've unleashed misery. So much energy has been wasted, so many tears shed. So much guilt and regret has plagued us—all because we've tried to change the unchangeable. In the near future, we'll begin to distinguish what in our nature is fixed and what is malleable. Whatever the answers are, there'll still be a lot humans can do to better themselves. ∞

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