

Letter From the Heartland

by Jane Greer

You Can Lead a Horse to Water

I came across Mitch Snyder's name the other day. Remember Mitch? He made the news first about three years ago, when, as head of the Community for Creative Non-Violence (CCNV), a Washington-based "homeless rights" group, he spoke out against the indignities perpetrated against 61-year-old Jesse Carpenter, who "froze to death in the shadow of the White House." Snyder called Carpenter's death "unconscionable" and said it dramatized the need for shelters for the homeless. Since then he's been in the papers occasionally advocating the same cause, most recently last week, and it made me think of Bob.

I'll call him Bob here, but I don't know his real name. He now lives in Bismarck. On sweltering days this summer I saw him sleeping in Interstate-exit ditches at the north end of town, or propped up on two gigantic Coleman coolers near the Post Office, his back against a light pole, hands behind his head, folding chair forgotten behind him.

Bob is black, so he's probably not a long-time North Dakotan: We have only a handful of black families in this state. Clearly, then, he came here from somewhere else, God alone knows why. Just as clearly, he's heard of our winters and doesn't intend to be caught off-guard, because when it was 102 and cattle were dying in the fields, we found Bob dressed in what he's *always* dressed in: a brown snowmobile suit, bright yellow rubber raincoat and rain pants under that, jeans and who knows what else under *that*. I know at least the three top layers because the top two are slit carefully across his backside and flap as he walks.

Bob travels with only his lawn chair and coolers and a ghetto-blaster. What's in the coolers is a mystery, but they support him in his frequent and obviously satisfying naps. He hangs out at the Post Office, hurting no one, talking or humming to himself, just standing around. Several downtown churches let him use their bathrooms to wash in. What he eats, I don't know, but surely Bismarck garbage cans hold no slimmer pickings than those anywhere else in

prodigal America; Bob is a healthy-looking man.

I've done some checking. The Salvation Army has a new building full of dorm rooms, but they can take care of people for only a few days. They didn't think Bob had come in. The police said that if they saw Bob sleeping in the ditch, they'd have to move him along but weren't equipped to take care of him. There's a brand-new home for the homeless in Bismarck, but, at least for now, Bob's not living there. The state Human Services Department said that Bob would be the county's responsibility, and the county said that they were powerless to do anything unless Bob came in and *asked* for help.

I can imagine what Mitch Snyder would make of all this. "Another one fallen through the crack," he'd write; "just another case of bureaucratic insensitivity, of government irresponsibility."

I say, Where is Bob's family—and what if he *likes* living this way?

It's odd—Jesse Carpenter, frozen stiff in the shadow of the White House, had a wife and a couple of kids he left 20 years before he drank himself to death. Mitch Snyder left a \$50,000-a-year job, a wife, and a family to go into the real world and do good (with a little time in prison for attempted robbery). If his kids decide Dad left them because they're worthless

and become street people, will he consider them government property? Snyder is the same kind of symbol as Jesse Carpenter and Bob, only he doesn't know it, and he's not exactly part of the *solution*, if you catch my drift. Where there is no God, as Chesterton said, all is permitted. Where there is no family life, all is neglected.

This being said, there's a lot of evidence that Bob is happy, and no evidence that he's hurting himself or anyone else. He told my priest that he got \$300 a month, knew that he could get clothes at the Salvation Army, knew where he could stay if he wanted to, was looking for just the right apartment, and wasn't especially looking for a job. Winter's coming, and yes, in spite of the snowmobile suit, I worry about where he'll sleep, but not obsessively. Bob is part of the larger Family of Man, of course, but it's my job to worry about the much smaller Family of Mine first, something Mitch Snyder doesn't understand.

Jane Greer edits Plains Poetry Journal in Bismarck, North Dakota.

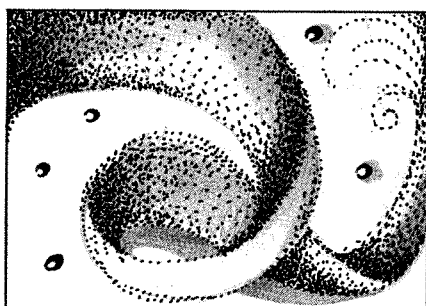
Letter From Mensa

by John Martin

Genius: A Clear and Present Danger

I hold in my hand the names of 205 credit-card-carrying members of the human race who've been described by a word that's fast becoming as irritating as superstar, glitz, or life-style. The word is genius, and it's time we recognized, with all Churchillian gravity, that from Stettin in the Baltic to the psychobabble retreats in Marin County, people are being called geniuses at a rate that should make us all want to pull down an iron curtain.

This sinister state of affairs was recently brought home by tributes to two public figures previously suspected of talent, to say nothing of genius: (1) Curly of Three Stooges fame, and (2) Andy Warhol, the recently deceased pop artist. That the first of these was the real article, however, I have on the authority of Steve Allen. Narrating a Three Stooges PBS documentary, Allen unblinkingly pinned the genius tag on Curly, offering in evidence a film clip in which the



LIBERAL ARTS

Here's a report on an Etruscan burial site from the newspaper of record:

The necropolis was described as the largest so far in the area, which was settled between the first and eighth centuries B.C. by the Etruscans.

—*New York Times*,
23 October 1987

Is this what Kierkegaard meant by saying life could only be understood backwards?

baldish comedian, alternately harassed and humored by a judge and a bailiff, attempts to raise his right hand, swear on a Bible, remove his derby, and hold onto his cane. Curly brought to his befuddlement neither the pathos of Chaplin nor the wit of Fields—although he is unquestionably likable, decent, and competent.

Mr. Warhol's genius, meanwhile, was asserted with casual authority by the *New York Times*: "The combination of his genius and [his followers'] energy produced dozens of notorious events throughout his career." Genius? Campbell soup cans, Brillo boxes, a movie called *Eat* in which the artist Robert Indiana takes 45 minutes to consume a mushroom? Notorious events, unquestionably. But genius?

Perhaps, like me, the reader is sufficiently antique to recall a time when genius was normally reserved for that rare soul who, in Dr. Johnson's phrase, "can do readily what no one else can do at all"—people on the order of Shakespeare, Michelangelo, Rembrandt, Bach, Newton, Tolstoy, and Einstein; people, in short, possessing what the dictionary defines as "transcendent intellectual or creative power." The tribe has never been numerous—to hear the term applied not only to the Curlys and Andy Warhols but to professional football coaches, Method Acting instructors, ad-

vertising copywriters, fashion designers, hairdressers, *et al.*, makes me long for the days when transcendent intellectual or creative power wasn't thought of as a civil right. Even the limited humility of Mr. Noel Coward comes to mind: "I believe that since my life began / The most I've had is just a talent to amuse," he said. "Talent," not "genius."

To be sure, genius is only the latest victim of our inflated verbal economy, in which the hypester has replaced the hipster as our chief minter of language. "Super" is a term now used so extensively that it has all the force of "passable" or "OK." "Superstar" has replaced "star" (a term good enough for Jesse Owens and Joan Crawford but apparently not for Carl Lewis and Jane Fonda) and is even now giving way to "megastar." "Existential" has never meant precisely anything, but is now used to mean "heroically exciting in a dull, philosophic way"—as in "the existential dramas of Lina Wertmüller." And "excellence" has now become the solemn rallying cry of at least 5,000 advertising clients, eager to describe their mediocrity, as in the U.S. Post Office claim "We deliver excellence for less."

Perhaps saddest of all is what has happened to "Renaissance man." Time was, the term described someone like Thomas Jefferson, of whom a biographer wrote: "a gentleman of thirty-two who could calculate an eclipse, survey an estate, tie an artery, plan an edifice, try a cause, break a horse, dance a minuet, and play the violin." Today a Renaissance man is anyone who can spell, fill out a tax form, and tell the difference between Chateaufort de Pape and Ripple. To keep a useful word like genius, then, from further degeneration, let me offer some suggestions that may possess, if not excellence, at least utility. After all, better to light a candle than curse the megadarkness:

First, don't refer to any of your family or friends as a genius. It'll only make them suspicious, and besides, most of us have never seen a genius, let alone sat across from one. If any of your friends insist *they've* seen a genius, make them produce evidence of their subject's ability to do unusual things with Campbell soup cans and Brillo boxes.

Second, before you describe your favorite cosmetics-industry novelist or nightclub comedian as a genius, ask if perhaps he or she couldn't better be

described as a qualified genius, a genius with an adjective. Charles Dickens, for example, while he may lack the stature of a genius pure and simple, can quite legitimately be called a "comic genius." So, for that matter, can Charlie Chaplin. Your nightclub comedian, however, probably can't. Be careful.

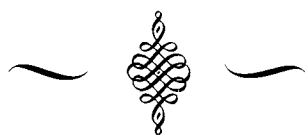
Third, if you should happen across a legitimate Renaissance man, don't complicate his life by calling him a genius. Jefferson, William Morris, and the Major Robert Gregory so beautifully praised in Yeats's famous poem would each better be described as "*a man of genius*"—someone possessing an extraordinary range of powers but not so overwhelmingly gifted in any one department as to tower above the field. In any case, your chances of meeting an authentic Renaissance man are probably about the same as your chances of running into Judge Crater in a shopping mall.

Finally, if you're one of those people whose mental metabolism requires them to say "genius" at least several times a week, try using it in such modest possessive constructions as the following, where it'll immediately be clear you're not employing the term in any serious sense: "France has a genius for making tourists feel welcome"; "Shirley MacLaine has a genius for simplifying complex international relationships"; "Ronald Reagan has a genius for controlling subordinates."

Several years ago, as I was taking in the excellence of litter that fills the streets in the city of Supermayor Ed Koch, my eye was suddenly caught by a *New York Post* scarehead proclaiming *Polish beauty seized at United Nations*. Apart from the ambiguity of the verb—had she been crudely grabbed by some macho passerby? kidnapped? arrested?—I was curious to have a look at this Slavic Venus and quickly plunked down my 35 cents. Those who recall Maria Ouspenskaya as the elderly gypsy in the old "Wolf Man" movies can perhaps best appreciate my disappointment when I flipped to the picture inside, for though the Polish "beauty" was somewhat younger than Miss Ouspenskaya, her aesthetic impact was roughly the same. Even if she was no beauty, though, she might well be a genius.

John Martin writes from Brooklyn.

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