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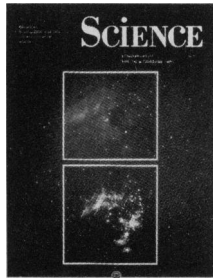
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COVER A archival Kitt Peak National Observatory 4-meter telescope color optical picture (top) and a color infrared picture (bottom) of Messier 17, a region of vigorous star formation. The infrared picture is a composite of images made through 1.2-micrometer, 1.65-micrometer, and 2.2-micrometer filters, colored blue, green, and red, respectively, and represents how Messier 17 would appear if the eye responded to infrared radiation. See page 1264. [The infrared picture was made with the Kitt Peak National Observatory 2.1-meter telescope by I. Gatley, D. L. DePoy, and A. M. Fowler, National Optical Astronomy Observatories, in collaboration with Charles Lada, University of Arizona]

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The Golden Median

We break our usual embargo policy to release prematurely a historical record purloined from a time capsule buried in the year 2050:

"No one knows the exact moment in which the glorification of mediocrity occurred in the United States. Perhaps it was the week that a number of prominent educators denounced the use of student SAT scores as a means of recruiting potential undergraduates to their institutions. Soon, the immorality of luring unsuspecting students by saying that they might be exposed to bright colleagues was recognized by all. Earlier, a number of distinguished academic institutions had abolished the grade of 'F,' saying that failing a course was too traumatic for the delicate ego of a modern college student. The giving of academic prizes and the granting of tenure were the next to go, since it had been found that the feverish rush for such honors had led to much fraud in the scientific world. 'Superior' became a pejorative word, joining the ranks of 'fascist,' 'communist,' 'liberal,' and 'conservative,' as terms to avoid at all cost. It was generally agreed that the urge to excel was a disaster for society, causing all sorts of misconduct, ulcers, unrequited love, and serious cases of terminal smugness.

"Once the true malady of society in the 1990s had been diagnosed, the beginning of a campaign to glorify the undistinguished middle was initiated. Those who had gotten to the top had clearly done so by chicanery or improper influence. Those left in the dust were either the victims of an evil system or lacked the means to procure genetic engineering on their parents. The Olympic Games, surprisingly, made the first contribution to the new movement by awarding gold medals to those who were in the middle of the pack and awarding two silver medals to those on either side of the middle person. Magazines provided the next step by canceling the appearance of beautiful women in skimpy attire on their covers, replacing them with dumpy individuals who riveted the reader's attention to the table of contents. TV anchormen were equalized when it was decreed that they must all shave their heads so that the accidental advantage of a beautiful head of hair would not be correlated with the gray matter underneath. All admission tests for college and employment, and all final examinations, were abolished because it was clear that they had been rigged against those who got low grades, whoever they might be. Chief executive officers, who had previously been chosen from those willing to sacrifice their mothers for a dollar on the bottom line, were selected from a totally different group, characterized as those who had a hand of jelly in a cotton glove.

"Once the Era of the Golden Median had been firmly established, a number of peripheral benefits ensued. Heart attacks declined appreciably as evolution selected for types who 'never do today what you can put off until tomorrow.' Fidelity became more popular because everyone tended to look and think alike, and so there was little temptation to stray. Clothing prices came down as shapeless blouses and beltless raincoats could be mass-produced at far less cost than designer garments.

"There were some disadvantages. The opprobrium cast on overachievers led to a general decline in the standard of living. However, this caused little political upheaval because the obvious fact that everyone was sinking into poverty together inspired a spirit of egalitarianism and prevented the kind of envious disruptions that had marred previous political life. Lowering the standard of living also solved the problems of the underprivileged because it was discovered that allowing the privileged to drop to the level of the underprivileged was a lot easier than making an effort to help the less advantaged move up.

"One could not expect this kind of utopian society to last too long. Mediocrity became commercialized. Cosmetics firms advertised creams that could make one look ordinary. Clothing stores had special events promoting their new lines of nondescriptwear. And unscrupulous flimflam artists sold schemes showing those at the front of the line how to move inconspicuously back to the middle. Fortunately, the internationalization of mediocrity meant that there was no urge to occupy other territories. The cancer rate dropped, since the general lack of exertion led to less inhaling of ozone. But surprisingly, people died at a younger age. No explanation of this phenomenon was found for years, until a run-of-the-mill surgeon doing a routine autopsy noted that in most of his patients all of the neurons had atrophied. It was the typical symptom of the most prevalent disease of the time: death from boredom."—DANIEL E. KOSHLAND, JR.