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# James V. McConnell (1925–1990)

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On November 15, 1985, a bomb in a package mailed to a University of Michigan psychology professor exploded when the instructor's research assistant opened the parcel. The research assistant was injured in the left arm and stomach; the professor, James Vernon McConnell, suffered hearing loss but was otherwise uninjured.

McConnell was born on October 26, 1925, in Okmulgee, Oklahoma. After earning a BA in psychology at Louisiana State University in 1947, McConnell went to the University of Texas, where he received his PhD in 1956. He joined the faculty at the University of Michigan and was promoted to the position of professor in 1963; the same year he received a Career Development Award from the National Institute of Mental Health and became affiliated with Michigan's Mental Health Research Institute. In 1976 he was the recipient of the Distinguished Teaching Award from the American Psychological Foundation and in 1979 became president of the American Psychological Association's Division Two (Teaching). Three aspects of McConnell's career stand out—his research on memory transfer, his contributions to teaching, and his creation of the *Worm Runner's Digest* (WRD).

In 1953, working with Robert Thompson, a fellow graduate student at the University of Texas, McConnell attempted Pavlovian conditioning of planaria, using light as the conditioned stimulus and shock as the unconditioned stimulus. When he moved to the University of Michigan, McConnell continued the research by cutting the trained worms in half and testing both halves for learning. The most controversial aspects of the research occurred when McConnell and his colleagues chopped up conditioned worms and fed them to cannibal flatworms. The research team claimed that worms who had eaten the trained worms learned the procedure faster than other flatworms who had dined on untrained animals. Further experiments were undertaken with flatworms and rats using RNA extracted from trained animals. The work was controversial in that some experimenters could obtain transfer effects, whereas others could not. The current importance of the work lies less with the earlier results than with the attention it directed to the possibility of a chemical basis for memory.

Jim McConnell was an outstanding teacher who enjoyed his interactions with students. He was a firm believer in practical applications. When he taught behavior modification, he used operant principles to teach the class, rather than just talking about them. Jim's educational philosophy changed dramatically in 1963, when he was

given a research professorship at the University of Michigan School of Medicine. This inspired him to attend medical school as a student. Having heard dreadful stories about the low quality of teaching in medical courses, he sat in on a few classes before committing himself to four years of torture. He discovered that the courses were even worse than he had feared. The experience of reading boring and incomprehensible textbooks motivated him to write a student-friendly textbook in psychology. The book, *Understanding Human Behavior*, was pretested on students at a variety of institutions before it ever saw print. With its sprightly prose, clear text, and running glossary, it was widely adopted and set a standard for other authors. The book is peppered with personal experiences of McConnell and his undergraduate students. The book begins with a conversation between Jim and a young man in his university office and ends with a bridge game in the student union.

The *Worm Runner's Digest* was an outgrowth of the memory transfer studies. In 1959, after *Newsweek* ran a small story on the planaria findings, a torrent of mail arrived requesting details. The WRD was an attempt to put something on paper that would answer these multitudinous inquiries. It quickly developed a life of its own as a needed outlet for humor in psychology. Jim believed that people should take science (but not themselves) seriously. The WRD came to public notice through an essay in the London *Observer* by novelist Arthur Koestler. With media attention, the subscription list exploded, necessitating a subscription charge for the first time. Jim edited several anthologies from WRD, including *The Worm Returns* (1965) and *Science, Sex, and Sacred Cows* (1971), with Marlys Schutjer. When respectable journals refused to print citations from WRD, the magazine was divided into two sections. The straight half was called the *Journal of Biological Psychology*, and the upside-down rear portion remained the *Worm Runner's Digest*.

The sender of the package bomb was never apprehended. Police suspect that the culprit was a serial bomber with a grudge against people whose names appeared in the newspaper. Jim died of a heart attack on April 9, 1990, in Ann Arbor at the age of 64. His legacy is also reflected in a generous endowment for Division Two's teaching awards in psychology.

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