

HARVARD MAGAZINE

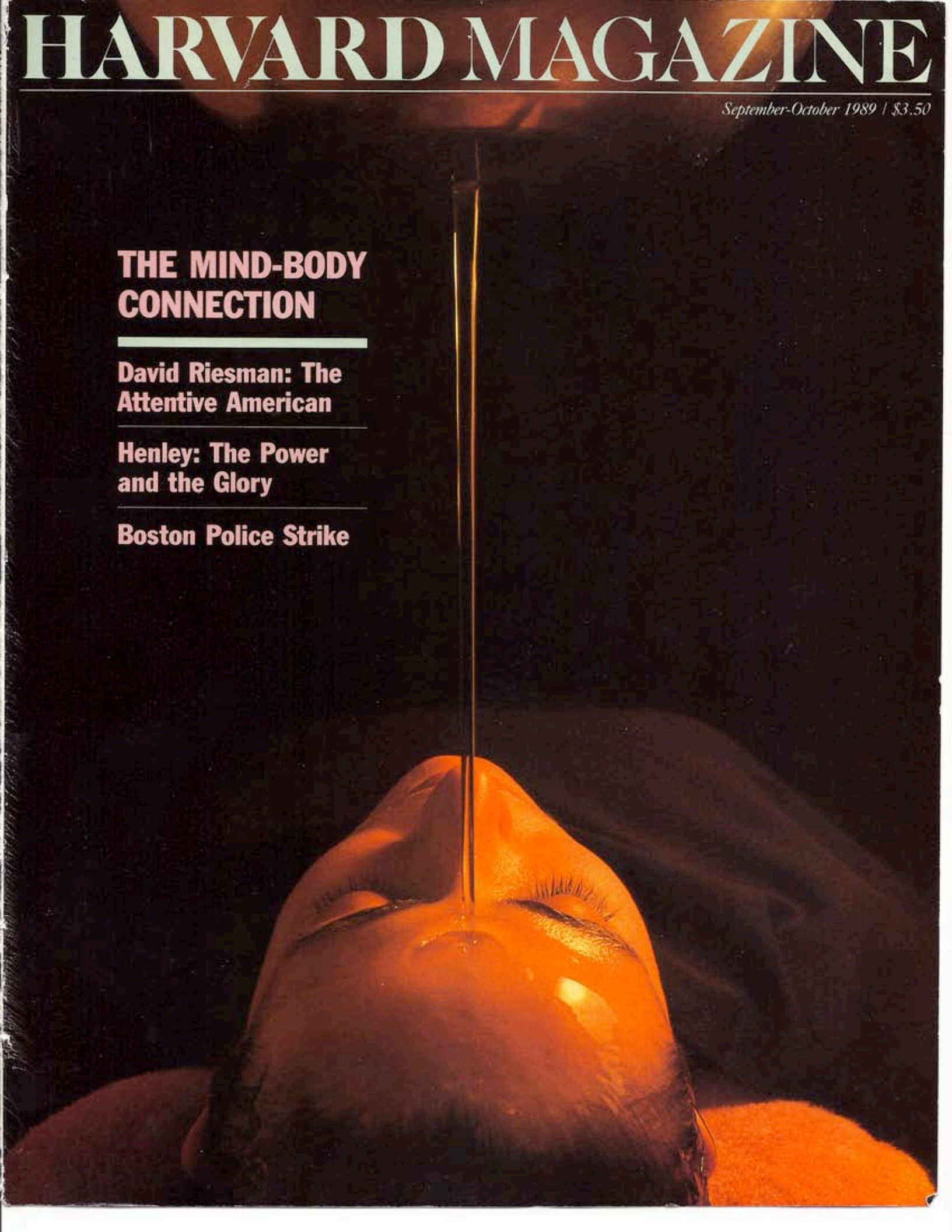
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THE MIND-BODY CONNECTION

**David Riesman: The
Attentive American**

**Henley: The Power
and the Glory**

Boston Police Strike



VITA

Charles Sanders Peirce

William Shebar

Whatever I amount to is due to two things," wrote C.S. Peirce late in life. "First a perseverance like that of a wasp in a bottle & 2nd to the happy accident that I early lit upon a METHOD of thinking . . ." The metaphor of the wasp in a bottle runs deep: Peirce's unorthodox ideas and uneven temperament caused him to be shunned by universities and publishers for the last thirty years of his life, leaving him to work in an intellectual bell jar. Few know that he was the founder of pragmatism, the philosophical method upon which William James and John Dewey—household names by comparison—built their achievements.

Peirce (pronounced PURSE) was a Harvard brat, the son of Benjamin Peirce, the foremost American mathematician of his time. In a house where Sever Hall now stands, the older Peirce trained his son in mathematics and science. One unorthodox method of building the boy's powers of concentration was to keep him awake all night playing difficult card games, sharply criticizing his every error.

Peirce entered Harvard at sixteen. He hated it. Used to his father's unconventional teaching methods, he found Charles W. Eliot, his math instructor, a bore. He spent much of his time reading Kant and Schiller, authors not assigned in any of his courses. While his logical and philosophical powers soared, his academic record sank: he ranked 79th of the 91 graduates in the Class of 1859.

With the help of his father, Peirce soon got a part-time job with the Coast Survey, a federal agency that mapped U.S. coastlines. He spent the Civil War years traveling between Louisiana, where he did most of his government research, and Cambridge, where his inexhaustible intellectual energies led him into a broad range of pursuits, including zoology (he studied the taxonomy of fishes under Louis Agassiz), astronomy (he made a pioneering attempt to map the Milky Way), philosophy (he was an active member of the Metaphysical Club, which included William James and Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr.), and philology (he made elaborate studies of poetic diction in Shakespeare, Browning, and Poe).

Peirce's work with the Coast Survey continued for thirty years. In 1875 he was placed in charge of its pendulum experiments to determine the relative force of gravity at various locations around the world. His international pendulum-swinging provided mapmakers with a more accurate picture of the shape of the earth.

But philosophy remained closest to Peirce's heart. In 1878 he set forth his principle of pragmatism in an article for *Popular Science Monthly* entitled "How to Make Our Ideas Clear," where he wrote that the meaning of a concept is nothing more than the observable actions and consequences that flow from it. For Peirce, this implied that

scientific method is the test of truth and that human knowledge is subject to constant revision. Peirce's pragmatism was a revolutionary departure from the traditional Cartesian view of knowledge as an edifice built on a foundation of indubitable beliefs. In an earlier article, he attacked Descartes's method of doubting the evidence of the senses: "Let us not pretend to doubt in philosophy what we do not doubt in our hearts."

When William James later popularized pragmatism, asserting that a belief—in God, for example—is in part verified by the comfort it provides for the believer, Peirce rebelled. He renamed his doctrine "pragmatism," a term he said was "ugly enough to be safe from kidnappers."

Meanwhile, in a rare instance of public recognition, Peirce in 1877 became the first logician ever elected to the National Academy of Sciences. Two years later he received a part-time job as lecturer in logic at Johns Hopkins. Much as he wanted to, he did not do well as a teacher. His love of precision made him invent a bewildering technical vocabulary that led William James to describe his lectures as "flashes of brilliant light relieved against Cimmerian darkness." He was overbearing at times, quick to take affront, and indifferent to the consequences of his acts. He was finally dismissed for living with Juliette Froissy (whom he later married) before concluding a divorce from his estranged wife, Melusina Fay.

In the years that followed, Peirce became increasingly isolated. With a small inheritance he bought a house in "the wildest county of the Northern States," near Milford, Pennsylvania. There he did some of his most original work in philosophy and logic—which publishers ignored because he was not a professor. When his money began to run out, Peirce participated in a series of ill-conceived business ventures that put him further in the hole. In 1907 his friend William James had to raise a small fund from friends and former students to keep him from starving.

Although Peirce died a frustrated, isolated man, many now consider him the most original and versatile thinker in American intellectual history. On September 5 three hundred scholars from a dozen different countries convened at Harvard for a week-long Peirce Congress, to honor his 150th birthday, and heed the call of a lecture Peirce wrote but never delivered: "If anybody wishes to have his eyes opened to a cosmos of thought of such wonderful beauty that . . . it would a thousand times repay the effort of finding it . . . I can help him to it." ▽

William Shebar '79 is a writer and TV producer. His profile of philosopher Willard Van Orman Quine appeared in the November-December 1987 issue of this magazine.

Opposite: Peirce at home with his wife, Juliette Froissy, in 1903.

