"The Greatest Mathematician in the World": Norbert Wiener Stories

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Norbert Wiener, the great mathematician who taught at MIT for over forty years and who was perhaps best known among the general public for his coining of the word cybernetics, became the subject of dozens of professor tales, jokes, and representative and attributive anecdotes. Some of the Wiener stories had to do with Wiener's real idiosyncracies, but many of them were universal donor types such as often attach themselves to the best-known theoretician on a campus (I remember several of them told about Einstein at Princeton in the late 1950s, for example). Conditions at MIT in the 1950s and 1960s were perhaps more supportive of this sort of narrative than they were at most urban universities: almost everyone there (with the exception of a few wild English majors) was in a technical field, and so at one time or another had to deal with some aspect of Wiener's work. Unlike many students of the physical sciences, Wiener was interested in the relationship between his science and the human condition, so he was of considerably more interest to students and even faculty than the run-of-the-mill genius. At MIT, everyone knew of Norbert Wiener.

In the stories he comes out as absent-minded, nearly blind, brilliant, elliptical, savagely moral, egotistical, and insecure. These characteristics are not, of course, mutually exclusive: the egotism and the insecurity are flip sides of the same coin; the absent-mindedness and the blindness are variants of a similar projective condition. One curious characteristic of the absent-minded professor (not just Wiener) is that he is often presented as someone who in certain areas is capable of prodigious feats of mind and memory.

[1]

It is almost as if his central memory suffered from cataracts, while his peripheral memory was nearly infinite and capable of perfect focus. There are not only stories about Wiener's inability to re-member where or who he was or what he had just done or was going to do, but also about his memorization of the configuration of all books of interest in the enormous MIT library, the speed with which his mind passed through the steps of complex mathematical conversations, etc. If I were to speculate about that I would prob-ably say something about the frequent need people seem to have for their heroes to be slightly maimed, slightly tainted, slightly aberrant, with the defect making them somehow more, rather than less grand. The defect of course also makes them more tolerable to their watchers.

Different informants seem to have preferences for different as-pects of Wiener's fictive character: One tells several stories having to do with his blindness and his ego; the stories by another have more to do with the sense of the man's physical presence and per-sonal brilliance; another remembers those stories illustrating his quirkiness in interpersonal relations. Out of an available repertory one selects the subject matter and focus that concern oneself most. One characteristic of a real folk hero is there is enough to him, real or constructed, to permit such selection to take place.

Some of the Wiener stories are obviously folktales; others are cast in the form of personal reminiscence or anecdotes. The latter two are equally legitimate folklore forms, for in such cases the sim-ple fact that one chooses to remember and transmit such anecdotes and remembrances about selected characters moves them to a plane of folkloristic concern.

A few facts might be useful here.[1]

Wiener was born in Columbia, Missouri, in 1894; he died in Stockholm in 1964. He attended Tufts College (A.M. in 1909), Cornell, and Harvard (Ph.D. in mathematical logic in 1913 at the age of eighteen). With a few years out for visits elsewhere, he spent his entire academic career at MIT, where he began as an instructor in 1919. Among laymen, Wiener was most famous for his new sci-ence of "cybernetics" (after the Greek word for helmsman), the theoretical background for the organismic involvement with elec-

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1. Biographical information on Wiener was prepared for me by Mrs. Maureen Frees, formerly a graduate student and my research assistant at SUNY, Buffalo.

tronic thinking that is one of the paradigmatic aspects of modern American society. He developed a mathematical theory for Brownian movement, a theory of harmonic analysis, a theory of information flow along a wave. He frequently worked with what are now called "on-line" systems—conditions in which continuous feedback makes continual redefinition of state possible. During World War II, for example, he developed a fire-control apparatus theory that took into account the human element of evasive action by another pilot, the most probable motion of the airplane after any given moment, with continual amendment of the target by observations between firings. His book *Cybernetics* (1948, rev., 1961) was the first major attempt to predict the effects of the new science on human affairs; he was for many years concerned with the human implications of such technology. His nontechnical books include *The Human Use of Human Beings* (1950), and two autobiographical books, *Ex-Prodigy* (1953) and *I Am a Mathematician* (1956). According to some people who knew him, he was one of the first people at MIT— a university whose whole climate in the 1950s was permeated by the military—to pull away from Defense work. One man said, "In addition to that fantastic intelligence you must remember there was also that morality . . . "

Norman Holland, now a professor at the State University of New York (SUNY) at Buffalo, said, "I used to see him here and there— as a faculty member. As a student, I didn't know him at all. I mean, he was a figure on campus, sort of off in the distance, but unless you were a math major or in his particular circle, you didn't know him." I asked Holland if people outside math or that circle knew of him anyway. "Oh sure," he said, "he was *the* most visible figure on campus, except maybe the president. But in those days the president was away all the time. Unlike today, of course."

Holland also said, "You know, it's a funny thing. I never took a class from him, I suppose I never really saw him in action as an undergraduate, but I never saw this brilliance, I mean it never manifested itself in any way. Or even indeed as a faculty member. I don't know. Why would that be? We didn't have faculty meetings there, really. A few people would show up and they would deliver some kind of message. This was called Communication. And everybody would go back to their labs again. So he wasn't at those. And there was, as I say, this circle that he kind of involved himself with

which I never was a part of. And that was it. One wonders where the average person saw him in action."

The average person *didn't* see Wiener in action; he just heard the stories. Cathy Reinsel, who tells some of the stories below, said of him, "Actually, the first time I ever met the guy it was in the middle of the hall right outside the Science Library and I was actually disappointed because he was perfectly normal."

I asked her, "Why were you so disappointed?"

"Well, I had heard so many stories about him. . . . The thing is, you can't tell which stories are true and which stories people make up, or not even make up but just kind of attribute to him."

Here are some of the stories about Norbert Wiener, made up, true, and attributed:

1–A. Wiener and the Little Girl (*J2014*) (Bruce Jackson)
I heard my first Wiener story at a Society of Fellows dinner shortly after I moved to Cambridge in 1963. Several of the Junior Fellows in the Society at that time had done their graduate work at MIT, and one told me a story that went something like this:

Wiener and his family bought a new house. They had been living in the old place for years and years and they needed a place with more room for the growing family, so they moved out of their house in Concord or Waltham to a new house not far away. Wiener was notoriously absent-minded, so his wife gave him a slip of paper with the new address. She even put it in his coat pocket. She knew he'd come home and forget they had moved, and then when he found out they had moved he wouldn't remember where they had moved to.

Wiener takes the train into Cambridge and spends the day at MIT, comes home on the train and, just as his wife expected, he goes straight to the old house. He is very upset because no one is there. He looks inside and the furniture is all gone. He remembers that he moved and that his wife wrote out the new address for him.

He begins to look through his pockets, then remembers that the new address is in his raincoat, which he left at his office.

A little girl goes by on a bicycle and Wiener is sure she lives in the neighborhood, so he stops her and says, "Little girl, little girl: I'm Professor Wiener. I used to live here. But we moved today and I don't know where the new house is. Do you know where my family moved?"

She says, "Mommy thought you'd forget, Daddy."[2]

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2. Some of the above stories are "Motif J2040—Absurd absent-mindedness—miscellaneous," for whatever that's worth. Richard M. Dorson has stories about half-blind, absent-minded, and peculiar professors in the college student folklore section of his

1–B. (Jerry Hill)[3] The way I heard the one about asking the little girl was, he says, "Where does the famous mathematician, Norbert Wiener, live?"

She says, "Right over here, Daddy." (J2014)

2–A. "Then I Had Lunch." (X120, J2040) (Phil Spiro)

The first one that comes to mind is perhaps very typical of the Wiener that was always seen by people walking in the halls at MIT rather than the people who actually had contact with him personally.

He'd be walking along with these fantastic bifocals so that his head was at such an angle that he looked more as though he was looking at the ceiling than where he was going on ahead. And even with those tremendous glasses on, he'd still be tapping the walls with one hand to make sure that he didn't take the wrong turning. He must have been pretty close to being legally blind.

And one of the classic stories is this. Wiener is walking along and he's in the halls and he's accosted by one of his pupils about some matter or other and they finish their business and Wiener says, "Oh, by the way, ah, which way was I going when you stopped me?"

And the student says, "You were going that way, sir?"

He says, "Oh, fine. Then I had lunch."

2–B. (Jerry Hill) You know the one about him running into the guy and stopping to talk and then he says, "Well, ah, in which direction was I going when I stopped to talk to you?"

He says, "Oh, that way."
He says, "Oh: I've already had lunch." (*J2040*)

3–A. "The Invariable Story about His Wife . . ." (*J2040*) (Cathy)
    Reinsel)
    Then there's always the invariable story about his wife, but I'm
not sure if that's true or not.
    I can't even remember where they'd gone. They had gone some-
where and his wife went somewhere and he went somewhere and
they'd been gone about three hours and he very calmly, you know—
it was maybe sixty miles from home—very calmly got in his car and
drove home. Without the wife. He had kind of just completely for-
gotten she was with him.

3–B. (Norman Holland) The other standard one about him was
that he had gone to New Haven to give a lecture or something and
he came back and greeted his wife and his wife said, "Where's the
car?" And he realized that he had taken the train back, having left
the car in a parking lot in New Haven.

3–C. (Warren G. Bennis) There's a very famous story about his
actually forgetting his car, and I sort of remember it was Prov-
idence, Rhode Island, and he arrived back in Boston on the train
and they had to send back to Providence to pick up the car.

4. Wiener and the Freshman Calculus Class (*X370*) (Phil Spiro)
    Most of the stories, with the exception of the one I've already
told, deal with Wiener as he was seen by people who had contact
with him.
    There's the one where he walks into a freshman calculus class.
    Almost all the rooms at Tech have a front door and a back door,
they're on the side wall. So he comes scooting in, starts writing very
hairy differential equations on the board and, finally, one of the
freshmen—they've been snowed by normal calculus anyway, so that
it takes them a while to recognize the difference—realizes that this
is not what they were supposed to be snowed by today. So he raises
his hand and, finally, Wiener notices him and he says, "Yes?"
    "Ah, excuse me, sir, but, uhm, I think you're in the wrong class-
room. This is freshman calculus."
    And Wiener says, "Oh." And walks out the door.
    Five minutes later, the freshmen are still waiting for their in-
structor to come in, and who comes in the back door and starts
writing differential equations on the back board?
    Wiener.

5. "Very Easy Book" (Norman Holland)
    They put a book together and I think finally published it which

was done just by photographing his blackboards. Every time he started to erase the blackboard somebody would jump up with a camera and photograph it. And they put all this together and this became a book. Very easy book.

6. How to Wake a Wiener (*X370*) (Phil Spiro)

Let's see, there were apparently other facets to Wiener's personality which—these I heard secondhand, in that they were told to me many years after I was at MIT, quite recently, and they were told to me by somebody who himself did not have much to do with Wiener. But these are supposed to be among the best authenticated of the many wild Wiener stories.

There was a sort of mathematics convention. It may well have been—come to think of it, it was—a computer convention, and some poor fellow was sitting up on the dais waiting to give his talk, reading a paper, and it was obviously his first time to read a paper at any convention, let alone a major one like this. And just as he starts to get up and read, he notices that Wiener, who is sitting in the front row prominently, has fallen asleep and is snoring quite loudly. So he starts giving his talk, which, by the way, was completely unrelated to any field of interest that Wiener had ever worked in. And the snoring gets louder and louder and louder. So he doesn't know what to do, he can't very well ask Norbert Wiener to stop snoring. He gets a brainstorm. So he's giving his paper and says, "And, as we see, by referencing the work of Professor Norbert Wiener . . ."

"Wha . . . huh . . . huh . . . huh?" Wiener wakes up. "What was that? What was that he said? He mentioned my name," to the people around him.

And they say, "Shhh, we'll tell you later."

And he keeps on going, that keeps him awake for awhile.

And then he falls asleep again and starts snoring again. So our fellow on the dais sees it again and says, "And so we see in viewing this work in relation, again, to the work of Professor *Norbert Wiener* . . ."

"What's that? Who? Who? What? What?"

And this is supposed to have actually happened, that it could cut through his fog of sleep once you mentioned his name.

7. "Wiener! Wiener! That's it! That's it!" (*J2010*) (Phil Spiro)

Which is sort of strange in light of one of his other stories, which is my favorite, about the time Wiener was sitting in his office pondering the inscrutable and his secretary was doing her work when Professor Stratton, the President of MIT calls up, "This is Dr. Stratton. I'd like to speak to Dr. Wiener, please."

"Ah, I'm sorry, Dr. Stratton, but he—he seems to be very busy. He's just been staring out the window for the last fifteen minutes.

I don't know what he's doing, but he's obviously thinking very deeply."

"All right. I'll call him back later."

Ten minutes pass. The phone rings. "This is Dr. Stratton. Is Dr. Wiener free yet?"

"I'm sorry, Dr. Stratton. He hasn't moved a muscle. I don't know, I don't know what it is. It must be very important."

"Okay." Hangs up, calls back in five minutes. "Hello. This is Stratton. Look, let me speak to Wiener. I don't care what he's doing."

So the secretary goes over and taps him on the shoulder. "Professor Wiener."

"Wiener! Wiener! That's it!"

8. "The Greatest Mathematician in the World" (Phil Spiro)

There was another one that I heard much later. Apparently Wiener had this big ego thing. I don't know how true it is, personally, but this story is based on that and this is supposed to be another true one, more true than the average true one I guess.

Wiener had a grad student from England who was working with him. And the student really thought that Wiener was the greatest mathematician in the world. He really thought this, and it was very probably true. And Wiener, of course, dug this very much, and they got along fabulously. There was only one trouble: Wiener never stopped, he never stopped thinking, he never stopped working, you know. He'd go home only because he had to and it was expected of him. But he kept throwing these ideas out to the graduate student, which of course the poor fellow had to work on.

Our graduate student was a nice upstanding young man, with perhaps one exception, and that was the fact that every once in a while, when the work pressure got too great, he just had to go off by himself and go on a bender. And Wiener never gave him the chance: he'd be working weekends, he'd be working Sundays, he'd be working holidays, he'd be working Saint Swithin's Day, what have you.

So the graduate student was really uptight about this, and he didn't know what the hell to do, and it didn't seem meet to him to complain about this to anyone else because, after all, it was Wiener.

But finally it got the best of him and he remarked about this to one of his friends, who happened to know Wiener quite well. And the friend said, "Well, look, here's what you do. You think he's the greatest mathematician in the world, right?"

The guy says, "Right, sure. He is!"

He says, "Well Wiener, this is, you know, a very strong thing with Wiener. So what you do is, you tell him one day, sort of in passing, that you don't think he's the greatest mathematician in the world."

The guy says, "Well, what'll that get me?"

He says, "Well, try it and see what happens." He says, "I guaran-
tee you won't get fired or anything."

"Okay, I'll try it."

So he's willing to try anything at this point and one day he comes
in and sits down with Wiener and starts talking. He says, "Say, you
know, Dr. Wiener, you know, I was very happy when I got the op-
portunity to work with you because I've always felt that you're the
greatest mathematician in the world."

"Well, that's, that's true, my boy."

"Ah, but there's one thing. I—I—I was rereading some of your
very early papers these days and I—I'm beginning to think that may-
be you aren't the greatest mathematician in the world."

Well, Wiener just sat there as though he had been hit by a bolt
of lightning. And he didn't say anything; he just sat there and
stared. And the young fellow, taking this as his cue, left. And he
went off on his bender and Wiener didn't bother him at all, and,
as a matter of fact, Wiener did really no productive work at all for
the next week or so. He'd just sort of sit there, mumbling, occasion-
ally making this note or something and he had this very peculiar
hurt expression on his face. Not so much hurt, really, as puzzled.
You know, maybe he was wrong.

So our friend began to get a little worried about this. He'd had
his bender and everything, so he went back to the guy that suggested
this and said, "Hey, look, what do I do now? The poor guy's real
up tight about this."

He said, "Well, go back and turn it off."

So the graduate student went back and sat down with Wiener and
they had their little talk. He said, "You know, Professor Wiener,
I've been rereading those earlier papers and, ah, I came to a real
hasty conclusion before. You are, by god, the greatest mathema-
tician in the world."

And Wiener's face lit up and he started doing work again.

9. Wiener and the Greatest Mathematician in Russia (Phil Spiro)

There is one other which I heard. This happened during the war
when Wiener was doing some very classified computations on, I
think it was, trajectory analysis of some sort. Gun-laying calcula-
tions.

Gun-laying?

Yeah. You have gun-laying radar, I believe that's the proper term.
The mechanism which aims the gun. When you talk about large
guns, I believe the appropriate term is gun-laying radar. No sexual
connotation, Bruce.

Ah.

Anyway, he was working on this crap, whatever it's called, and he
was called into Washington and he went through all the usual red
tape and the project was given to him and they told him, "And, by

the way, for your own information, somebody in Russia is working on the same thing." This of course was at a time when they were one of our allies.

And Wiener perked up and he said, "Oh, who's that?"

Said, "Well, I'm afraid we can't tell you. It's a classified matter of course."

And Wiener sort of mumbled and went off, and he went back to work on it ostensibly, but he didn't get any work done for about three or four months. And whoever his superiors happened to be at the Institute at the time were quite worried because Washington kept on calling them up asking how Wiener was coming along on his work 'cause it shouldn't have taken him that long. They said, "Well, we can't seem to get anything out of him. You know, he is a genius and you've got to handle him with kid gloves, but, ah, this is remarkable: he's just sitting there and he—it's almost as though he refused to work on it, although he won't come out and say as much."

So after a couple of weeks, he came right out and said, you know, he just won't work on it until he finds out who the Russian who's working on it is. So finally Washington gave in and they told him it was So-and-so, who happened to be the greatest mathematician in Russia.

And later on, Wiener was asked why he wouldn't work on that project until he found out the guy's name. After all, what bearing could it have since they were working independently. And Wiener simply said, "Well, it was only meet that if the greatest mathematician in America is working on it, then the greatest mathematician in Russia should be working on it."

And once he found out that the greatest mathematician in Russia was working on it, why then he'd work on it, too.

10. "What Are They Saying about Me in Russia?" (Warren G. Bennis)

One of the funniest ones is his sort of introverted conceit when he would ask anyone he saw, particularly if they were from another country, "What are they saying about me? In Bangkok?"

One day when I was there, there was a group of visiting mathematicians from the Institute of Probability from Moscow, he was posing with them under the dome, the main building at MIT. And you know how Russians stand very stiff and straight. And the photographer was saying, "Hey, Dr. Wiener, can't you say something to them that would get them to laugh, that would loosen them up?"

And he said, "Of course. Tell me, gentlemen, what are they saying about me in Moscow?" And they broke up at that. He said this first in Russian and then someone asked him what he'd said.

11. "Your Method is Wrong." (*J1210*) (Phil Spiro)

I thought of another one while I was telling that, it's the differ-
ential equations again.

Wiener had this nasty habit, besides wandering into the wrong
classroom and scrawling these silly equations on the board, of solv-
ing them in his head, which is, you know, not only difficult, but
noninformative for students.

So Wiener finally did this once too often with one of his classes
and one of the fellows got quite pissed off on that. So after class he
comes up to Wiener and he said, "Ah, Dr. Wiener, on problem 27,
I found your solution very interesting, of course, but I did it in a
different way." So he writes the equation out on the board and—
just as Wiener did—he stood there for about a minute and then
wrote out the answer with none of the intermediate steps, which
should take up about a whole board.

And Wiener sort of looked at it for about five minutes and
scratched his head and he said, "Well, your answer is right, but
your method is wrong."

12. "It Checks the Other Way Too" (Barry Stein)

This story is probably apocryphal because I've also heard it told
about other people. It concerns a day when Wiener was lecturing on
[a] sophisticated branch of mathematics and a question was raised
as to whether either of two alternatives would be used to solve a
certain problem. Wiener stood with his face to the blackboard with
a piece of chalk in his hand, mumbled for a moment and said, "Ac-
cording to the first method, the answer is so-and-so," and wrote it
down. And then he stood for another moment and said, "Yes, that
checks the other way, too."

13. "It's Intuitively Obvious." (*J1210*) (Phil Spiro)

That reminds me of another story which is not directly con-
nected with Wiener, but it's very similar. It's concerning the soph-
omore calculus instructor whose name escapes me, and he was fond
of saying that things were "intuitively obvious." Now this is a catch-
phrase at Tech. You know, everything is intuitively obvious to the
most casual observer, no matter how ridiculously complicated it
may be. But this guy really felt that some of these things, which
were way beyond the experience of a sophomore calculus student
without some considerable explanation, should have been intui-
tively obvious to them. And finally one of the students got keyed
off at this and he got up and said, "Ah, look, professor, that's not
intuitively obvious."

And the guy looked at him and said, "It's not intuitively ob-
vious?" He says, "Just a minute."

He walks off into the little room behind the class room, sits there
(somebody looked in) and he was just scribbling away like mad,

turning out reams of paper. Went back in, started to speak and then shut his mouth, started scratching things on the board.

After about five minutes of this, he turns to the kid and says, "No, it *is* intuitively obvious."

14. Wiener's Medical Care (Edward D. Ives)

The first time I ever heard of Norbert Wiener stories was when I was working for the New York Life Insurance Company in the policy brief section, filing cards there in the spring, I think it was, of 1955. There was a fellow there by the name of Jack McGann who had just graduated, as I recall, from MIT and was doing graduate work at Columbia at the time. And I forget how the subject came up but while we were supposed to be filing cards, he got talking about Wiener and one of the stories was that the man would take absolutely no care of himself at all but that MIT used to send a team of medical specialists out to his house once a month to make sure that their property was in good shape.

I don't know whether you'd ever heard this or not, have you?

No, I hadn't.

This was one of the things that he told me and of course that may be true at that.

15. "Nix on Nixon" (Edward D. Ives)

Then he mentioned that, the first story was that just before the Eisenhower-Nixon election in '52, Wiener used to be walking around through the halls at MIT and would open almost any classroom door and simply say, "Nix on Nixon" and then walk off.

That was one of them and I think that was how the whole conversation got started.

16. The New Chapel (*J1250*) (Norman Holland)

I remember one that happened when I was not at MIT, during those happy years when I was at the other end of Cambridge.

They had the design for the new chapel, the very modern architectural kind of splendid creation. And this was submitted to a faculty meeting and they were all trying to comment on it. And most of the people were against it, it was too radical, it was too strange, offbeat, and too different.

And finally Wiener stood up and he said, "I think this is the perfect design for a chapel."

And there was a hush and everybody said, "Why?"

And he said, "Because when you look at it you say, 'Jesus Christ!' "

17. Wiener's Molding (*X120*) (Edward D. Ives)

He mentioned that they had a special little, what the hell do you call them, molding along the walls for Wiener so that he could find

his way from his office to his classroom simply by running his fingers along one of these moldings. And that it was quite common for him to be walking along, running his finger—this is on account of his near-blindness—to be walking along running his finger along that molding, walk into the classroom, follow the molding right clean around the classroom and then walk out, keep going, just keep going, go right back to his office.

That was one of the stories that Jack told, I remember.

18. The Molding Again (Norman Holland)

Casting back in my mind, the first one I must have heard as a bright-eyed freshman of sixteen or seventeen, was of Wiener walking the long, long corridors of MIT—MIT is a building built on corridors—and holding out his finger against the wall and holding a book in the other hand and reading as he went along and using the finger to keep him pointed right. And of course all these corridors have turnings and bays and closets and whatnot, and he would dutifully follow around into the bay, going around into all its three angles, and then out the other side—still reading his book.

Thinking back to it, I had heard one of the biggest bays was the one leading into the Infirmary waiting room. And that he went in and around a corner and into the waiting room and all the way around the Infirmary, and then back out, back into the corridor again.

One has heard even that he has walked into a big lecture by mistake and gone all the way around the lecture hall and out the other way with his finger there, but that I don't believe.

19. "Three Different Ways." (*J1210*) (Edward D. Ives)

And another was of Wiener standing up before the class—he had been made to teach a rather elementary calculus course of some kind—and standing up before the class and having somebody ask him, saying, "Dr. Wiener, how did you arrive at this answer?"

Looking up, not saying anything, looking off into space and then turning around, writing the answer on the board.

The student says, "Yes, yes, we know that, we know that. We—we got the answer, too, but how did you arrive at that answer?"

Another silence, looks off into space, turns around and writes the answer on the board again, same answer.

They say, "Yes, yes, we know the answer! But how did you arrive at it?"

Same thing. And I remember that it was three that Jack used in this particular case. Ah, same thing, looks off, turns around, writes the answer on the board again

They said, "Yes, doctor, we know this is the answer, but how did you get it?"

He looks at them and says, "It *must* be the right answer—I got it three different ways."

20. "A Small Squiggly Line" (Norman Holland)

Another one that I remember hearing about was just a sort of mystery that people had. Because they walked past a classroom and they saw Wiener there with some strange oriental gentleman, evidently another mathematician, and the two of them were in total rapt silence staring at the blackboard, and on the blackboard was nothing but a small squiggly line. And what its meaning was nobody could ever figure out. It was evidently tensor analysis of an incredibly complicated kind. Who knows?

21. The Snoopy Diagram (Lee Mitchell)

The one that a friend of mine who had a course under Wiener tells.

The course in the Electrical Engineering department which teaches beginning computer programming has a problem. This problem consists of trying to write a program which will eliminate the noise from communications. They're given a set of data and they're to eliminate the noise and come out with a picture [on the computer] which is a coherent picture. It so happens that the picture that they always give is that of Snoopy the Dog. But it doesn't look like that if you just print out the data normally. This friend of mine was in the Electrical Engineering. He was basically a mathematician and he had a course under Professor Wiener. And one time Professor Wiener forgot his class notes and this was the project he did that day: to compute a set of data and work out this problem. This is what he did when he forgot his class notes one day. And it's used in this beginning computer course now. [I.e., what Wiener did on the blackboard with chalk normally takes a computer to handle.]

This is where it came from, this day he forgot his class notes. They were just playing around, according to my friend.

22. Wiener's Cigars (Cathy Reinsel)

Reinsel: H. S. was telling us the other night that Wiener used to get a big charge out of scaring the life out of freshmen. This happened to H. S. when H. S. was one. H. S. has been here about eight years.

Jackson: H. S.?

Reinsel: I don't know his last name. Four years I've known that guy. His first name is Howard, but you wouldn't dare call him Howard.

Hill: Spelled A-i-t-c-h.

Reinsel: All right. But the thing is, that when he was a freshman, everybody knew who he was, Norbert Wiener, the comical guy. And he would sort of pick on some poor soul and chase him down the

hall yelling, "Hey you!" And you'd sort of stop and shudder in your tracks and he'd very calmly come up and ask you for a match or something, you know, for his cigar.

Jackson: For his cigar?

Reinsel: For his cigar.

Hill: Oh those wicked cigars. I think he smoked those crumbly Italian cigars.

23. Wiener's Parking Permit (Cathy Reinsel)

He had his parking permit rescinded from MIT. I'm sure you've heard about that. . . . He was kind of blind, actually, and it turned out that they were giving parking permits to anybody as important as Norbert was. But he was banging up so many cars in the parking lot that the campus police finally had to take his permit away from him to park. He was quite insulted by that. That's true, that's dead true. You know, the poor man didn't come to work for about three weeks.

24. The Two-Train Riddle (Jerry Hill)

Here's one like that where after doing the problem he said, "What do you want? I've already worked it three different ways." I don't know whether this one is attributed to Wiener yet or not, but it probably will be. There's one that I'll bet will come around to him that I heard.

The old riddle: two trains are approaching each other. They're traveling thirty miles an hour, they are thirty miles apart. A bee is on the front of one train, flies to the front of the other train and back and forth and back and forth. The bee is flying at sixty miles an hour. How far does the bee fly before the two trains meet?

Well, there's two ways to work this: if you're a mathematician, you'd probably make a little infinite series, you know, and the other way to work it is that it takes the trains a half-hour to meet, therefore the bee flew twenty-two and a half miles. Somebody sometime asked him what the answer to that little riddle was and he thought for about three seconds and he said, "Oh, two—no, twenty-two and a half miles." (I think that's the answer by the way, I mean, I couldn't swear to it.) [The answer is, of course, thirty miles. B. J.]

And the guy said, "That's pretty strange, professor. Usually if you ask an engineer a question like that he will figure that the bee flew for a half an hour and figure it on the basis of that. But usually if you ask a mathematician that question he will set up an infinite series and carry it out until, ah, you know, with a series of differential equations until it converges."

And he said, "Oh. I did."

25. Wiener's Upside-Down Bifocals (Barry Stein)

Wiener was quite famous, among other things, for always walking

along the corridors at MIT with one hand out touching the wall and the other holding a book which he was reading at the same time he was going along. The funny thing is that while he was doing this he always had his head tipped way back as if he could not see properly through his glasses. His glasses, as a matter of fact, were about as thick as Coke bottles so there was always some concern about his eyesight. The explanation lay in the fact that he decided he spent more time reading than walking, and consequently he had his bifocals made upside down. Thus the reading portion of the glasses was on top, which permitted him to use the normal straight-ahead eyesight, and, when he was trying to look at something, he had to tip his head back to see through the bottom which was the part for seeing where he was going.

26. Kriegspiel (Barry Stein)

Another story which was told to me by my father, who was a student of Wiener's when he was a young calculus instructor, is per-haps a little more unusual.

At this point Wiener was teaching freshman calculus and his method of teaching was something less than up-to-modern stan-dards. He came in with a copy of the *New York Times* under his arm and collected the homework from the day before, and then asked for questions about that homework. He disposed of these questions in a matter of seconds which were completely uninforma-tive to the students. Then, as always, he gave a short fifteen-to-twenty minute quiz during which he read the *Times*. Following that, he would spend the remaining half-hour or so talking about some of the theories he was working on which, of course, was com-pletely Greek to the freshman calculus students. The net result was that practically nobody was learning any calculus except as they were able to figure out for themselves or get help elsewhere.

Wiener, however, was in the habit, as time permitted, of sitting in the dining room at Walker Memorial Hall and playing a variety of chess called Kriegspiel. Kriegspiel is a game in which both players are blindfolded and the moves are made through a referee or inter-mediary to whom the players whisper the moves. The referee makes the move on the board and tells the player whether a piece has been taken, or that it is an illegal move, or that it is an unoccupied space. On the basis of only this information and memory as to the previous state of affairs, the players try to figure out what is happen-ing. Wiener was fairly good at this game but by its very nature it tends to generate in the players a specific style of play or a specific attack. My father watched this a few times since he was interested in chess and he learned quite accurately what Wiener's style of moves were and what his standard approaches were. And one day he came up to Wiener after lunch and said, "Dr. Wiener, I would like to play a game of Kriegspiel with you if you've got a moment."

Wiener, of course, was delighted. A referee was pressed into service and three games were played, which my father won almost immediately in all three cases. Wiener promptly took off his blindfold, looked across the table, and said, "Young man, haven't I seen you somewhere?"

My father said, "Yes sir, I'm in your freshman calculus course."

Wiener looked at him for a moment and said, "Anybody that can play Kriegspiel like that deserves an A in calculus." And he got his A.

27. Wiener's Hungarian (Norman Holland)

Of course all this was augmented by the fact that he was a little round man with Coke-bottle bottoms for glasses' lenses, and absolutely brilliant, and he knew all kinds of languages. The number was again a piece of folklore—fifty-seven languages, sixty-three, you name it.

But a true story: I had a friend who was a Hungarian who claimed he could never have a decent conversation with Wiener because Wiener always insisted on talking Hungarian to him and his Hungarian wasn't that good. And this was true of his Chinese and a whole lot of other languages. He would always talk to these people in their own language.

28. Wiener's Chess (Warren G. Bennis)

He was terrible, but he did know other languages. He not only knew Chinese but he knew several very important dialects in Chinese, for example. But he spoke languages the way he played chess: badly.

He used to go to the faculty club every day and always approach people and ask them to play chess and it was embarrassing because nobody wanted to play chess with him because he was so bad.

29. Wiener's Good Memory (Barry Stein)

Another story about Wiener which involves my father, but which I also observed, was very much later when Wiener was a very well-known mathematician. Probably twenty years after he had been teaching his calculus course, my father and I stopped Wiener on the sidewalk one day on the way to the library and my father reminded him of his past acquaintance and Wiener said, "Where are you going?" He said, "I'm off to the library. I'm looking for a book called so-and-so," mentioning some fairly abstruse and not particularly common book on math.

Wiener's response was immediate. "Oh yes, you will find that book on such-and-such a shelf at exactly this point," and he gave complete instructions on where the book was in the Main Library. And indeed, there it was.

30. Whirlwind Two (Norman Holland)

Something is coming back to me, which is again not a folktale, exactly.

For a while I worked on a Navy project in about 1949. It was a computer, a very early computer, Whirlwind Two. Whirlwind One and Whirlwind Two—they were in transition. This was the second computer after ENIAC. And what was fascinating was that apparently somebody back in what seemed at that point almost like a mythological past, maybe as much as three or four years previous, had sat Wiener and Von Morgenstern and somebody else—I don't know, maybe Oppenheimer—down in a room in Princeton, sort of to chart the future of what was needed and the kinds of problems that a calculating machine might be useful for. And they just talked for an afternoon and somebody transcribed the results. Not the conversation but just their general conclusions. And here was this immense apparatus, hundreds of people of whom I was a very small cog in this enormous apparatus, working away generating up this machine which was all a result of this afternoon's conversation between these three minds.

31. "That Man Should Be Shot!" (Norman Holland)

The true story, which I heard, which I saw: I was sitting at the same lunch table during the quiz show scandals and who was it—Charlie Van Doren—and Wiener was really furious about that. He said, "That man should be shot!" And I sort of, my jaw dropped. Poor Charlie Van Doren was suffering a great deal at the time, I thought. And yet he was adamant on this subject. He felt he had discredited the whole academic profession. Teachers were like ministers and priests and you just couldn't do this kind of thing. Very strange response.

32. "You'll Go Far" (Warren G. Bennis)

Oh, I have a marvelous Wiener story. I was there when it happened.

At MIT's Faculty Club there are two round tables at the very entrance. There are other big round tables, but there are two round tables which have developed a tradition where the loners come in and sit, just by themselves. You don't come there in threes. The Economics Department used to eat at two round tables but that was sort of Economics Department informal roundtable every day. But there were two round tables where people who were usually by themselves came. And you'd meet people there. Quite often people did this I suppose—though I never did it except when I had to sit there because there were no seats available—to meet other people from the Institute. Wiener used to sit at one of these two round tables every day. And he would always identify the foreigners and begin to talk to them in their language. He would try to use their

dialect and then invite them to play chess, which they never could refuse. Though, in fact, he was a terrible chess player.

But the day I was at the table with him, Charlie Townes, who won the Nobel Prize in 1963 for inventing the laser, was sitting next to him. And this must have been just before Wiener died, and Wiener said, "What's your name, young man?"

And Townes said, "Charles Townes."

"And, uh, uh, what department are you with?"

He said, "I'm in the Department of Physics."

"Oh, it's a very interesting field. What area in physics are you working in?"

And he said, he'd just come back from getting his prize, incidentally, he went over in 1963 to get the award, and Townes said, "The laser."

Wiener said, "Great field, young man! You'll go far."

Just as he was myopic visually, he was myopic in almost all of his interpersonal events. He could have that kind of discussion, not having any idea he was talking with the guy who invented the bloody thing. And not giving a damn. That's the other part. He couldn't—if you were with a guy, I mean, you might have even made the connection, you know that laser and Townes go together, you know.

But it was that total lack of feedback in some ways, or feedback had to be terribly—I guess he always had enough trust in some way, being blind, practically blind, maybe that was it. I never thought of it psychodynamically, but I suppose if you're blind enough—and he *was*, I mean he was damn near blind, you know—that maybe you feel that somebody's going to take care of you, and a way of taking care of you is to kind of *lead* you to the right things. So he always had that trust and expected the environment or somebody in it would actually do it for him. He never had to exert to get feedback.

I want to include one more Wiener story. It indicates something about Wiener, certainly, but there is latent in it something of the attraction so many of the other stories have. Professor stories are told not only by students but by other professors, and whatever reasons the students have for maintaining such narratives I think one reason the professors themselves need them is because they are always—we all are—trying to come to some sort of accommodation with what they know might be done in their field and what they think they themselves are capable of doing. There is always a gap that in many leaves a feeling not unlike a slight hunger, but one nothing will really make go away. This story is a fable, its teller says (he asked to remain anonymous—he was at MIT in the late 1950s and early

1960s), and I think it is surely something like that. It suggests that even Wiener has that emptiness, perceives that gap, and if Wiener has it of course everyone else like him or nearly like him or who would like to be like him, may suffer the same, and I suppose there is a certain comfort in that, and that is one thing such stories do for the people who have them. The story is this one:

33. "I'm Not Gauss."
    The one about the suicidal aspects of Wiener has never been in print. It was Howard Freeman who Norbert used to see every Saturday because they lived I think very close to one another. That story better come from an anonymous person 'cause it's true and it is a brilliant story because it's really a fable.
    The story is that he's a very suicidal guy, suicidal based on the idea that his expectations were just so great that no one could ever —no body, no thing, no achievement could ever—satisfy that inner anguish that he wasn't a good mathematician.
    He used to come to this guy Freeman almost every Saturday threatening to commit suicide. And then Freeman would go through a kind of litany of all of his recent achievements with him. He would say, "Well, you just had your paper on smooth functions translated into Hindi and fifteen other languages; your book *Cybernetics* has just sold its five-hundred-thousandth copy, it's now being put into paperback; there's a big article about you in *Life* magazine this week. . . ." And he'd go on and on and on and on and on, about what a great man, what a great mathematician Wiener was.
    Finally at the end of one week, I guess, it happened. He said, "So what do you mean you're not a great mathematician?"
    And then Wiener said, "Yes. But I'm no Gauss."
    And I think that story will hit every academic man right in the balls, because who ever *does* think he's any good, really. You're comparing yourself to Catullus if you're a poet or Gauss if you're a mathematician. . . .
    It's an absolutely true story.

One final note. I suspect one will not be able to collect stories like these very much longer—not only about Wiener, but about anyone who in the past or at present (if there is anyone at present) occupied or occupies such a role on a campus.
A basic community illustration for folklorists teaching folklore has long been the campus itself—there has been the lore of fraternities, of famous professors, of superstitions cherished by males and

females about sex, the songs, jokes, and jargon. At one time one of the primary topics of campus narratives had to do with the foibles of that well-known caricature, the absent-minded professor. Sometimes he was simply capricious, sometimes he was flat-out weird— but people knew who he was whatever guise he wore at the moment. So far as I can tell, the genre has atrophied.

There are several reasons for this, but most important is that the coherent campus now exists only at small colleges or out of the way places, places far from the urban scene and the world as most of us have come to know it. The modern multiversity simply does not offer the student or the faculty member the kind of social cynosure necessary for that sort of narrative to circulate and survive. Too few students know too few faculty members, students and faculty in one field never see students and faculty in another, and the universities are so large and the students and professors so much involved in their own worlds—worlds that extend beyond the boundaries of any campus, mythic or real. The rest of campus folklore too—as we now know it—will probably soon be, if it is not already, as moribund as lumberjack folklore.

Changing social conditions always change social articulations, and verbal folklore of course is simply that, the articulations of a society of the things that concern or amuse or frighten it. Fraternities are a dying institution—kids are hipper now than they once were and the social advantages of belonging to such gratuitously elitist clubs is diminished; as state universities become the place where most students go, the "frats" lose their charm, their power. Much campus folklore was located in those houses, for they were one of the few places where student life was by definition the center of interest for all participants. Campus sex folklore has been pretty much neutralized by Enovid and the Lippes Loop: even if there isn't as much activity going on as some people like to think, surely the youth of today are more at home with the facts (and options) of life than their predecessors.

What folklore there is on campus has more to do with youth culture than campus culture—things like material folklore customs and techniques connected with grass, stories of busts and how you got across the border with your stash, the elan of bikes (which replaced convertibles), the argot, the different experiences with CN

and CS, the rock music (which is pretty hard to sit around a frat house and hum).

Campuses are so big, so busy, so much is going on downtown, uptown, across town, on the tube, between the headsets, all those places. Once one said "Did you hear the story about Professor X?" and got for an answer, "No, what is it?" Now the answer is, "Who's he?"

In a *who's-he* world, stories like these don't survive.

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