

# Discussion

The goal of research could be to learn new things that can change lives. Caroline Hoxby seems to do that ["Climb Higher"]

@willafriedman ON TWITTER

**FROM THE EDITORS.** Among the ten people we celebrated in the American Ingenuity Awards issue were Dave Eggers and Mimi Lok, whose *Voice of Witness* books and classroom projects collect the histories of everyday people in catastrophic situations ["Voices Carry"]. "Critically important to respect and record these testimonies," Karen Nielsen Tobey remarked on Facebook. "History is personal!" Rock 'n' roll phenom St. Vincent was recognized for her solo albums and the sophisticated sonic landscapes she created with David Byrne on *Love This Giant*—a "forward-thinking collaboration," Sam Naples wrote on Facebook, and "a testament to the greatness of [her] artistry." We saluted the scientist John Rogers for his pioneering electronics that dissolve when no longer needed, and readers were impressed by the prospect of disappearing medical devices. But Hazel Brutsche said the technology was "amazing, terrifying and miraculous all at the same time." And then there was the developmental biologist Michael Skinner, honored for experiments suggesting that physiological damage caused by a toxin can be transmitted in an unexpected way to subsequent generations.

## Re-Evaluating Genetics

The importance of Skinner's work is that it provided the first example of transgenerational epigenetic inheritance of the consequences of an exposure to a chemical. The concentrations of the chemical used are not that important. What is important is that

Skinner's work unraveled a mechanism of inheritance that is not genetic. This has immense implications for how we understand ourselves and our responsibility for future generations. It also offers hope for prognosis and intervention. I agree that it challenges the classic outlook of genetic determinism. Skinner has encountered a lot of criticism and rejection, which is expected for somebody who is challenging prevailing dogma.

**Moshe Szyf**  
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Skinner's work showing that the toxic effects of some chemicals can be carried over generations has caused us to re-evaluate environmental health threats. The consequences of environmental exposure are not

just reflected in our own health or that of our children, but the health of generations to come.

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## Befriending Ben

When you're a professional historian, this kind of thinking makes perfect sense ["Visualizing Ben," about how historian Caroline Winterer is using big data to uncover Benjamin Franklin's social networks]. Famous people like Ben Franklin were affected by their social networks. While the article indicates that Winterer may be looking for other influential people Franklin was connected to, it will be interesting to see the not-so-famous

people who influenced Franklin as well. It is easier to see why things happen when we know all the characters and their potential motivations.

**Mary Warner**  
ON FACEBOOK

## Correction

In our special November issue, *101 Objects That Made America*, the article on the birth control pill said Katharine McCormick was the second woman to graduate from MIT. The MIT registrar's office reports that numerous women received an MIT degree before McCormick.

## Clarification

In his November essay about an 1880s U.S. government ration ticket, William Least Heat-Moon wrote that it was given to an Oglala Lakota tribe member named Woman's Dress, "perhaps, though not certainly, a female head of family." Many readers hastened to say that the recipient was in fact a well-known man who played a role in the murder of Crazy Horse. But curators at the American Indian Museum, which holds the artifact, say Woman's Dress is a family name and no records exist to determine exactly who received the ration ticket.

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