

IS THE MEDIUM THE MESSAGE?

# New Philosopher

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news**

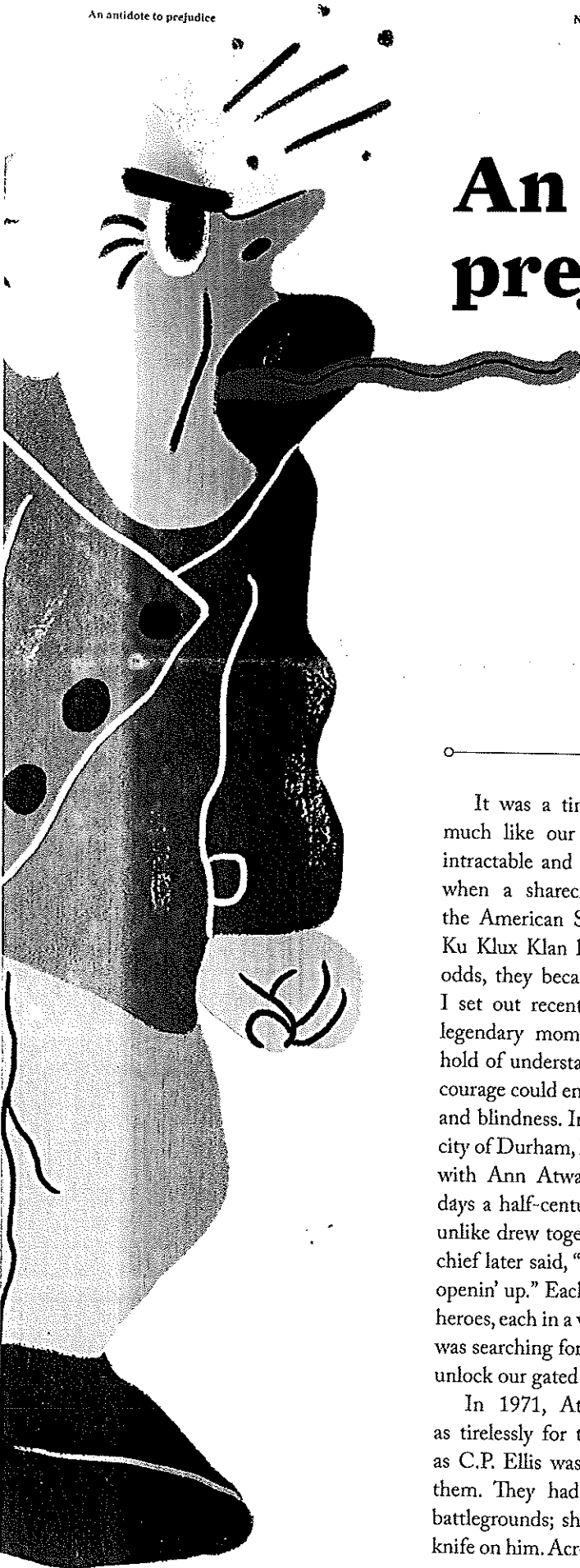
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Information overload

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Attentional commons



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# An antidote to prejudice



It was a time of deep divisions, much like our day. Hatred seemed intractable and the curse of bias rife, when a sharecropper's daughter in the American South stood up for a Ku Klux Klan leader and against all odds, they became enduring friends. I set out recently in pursuit of this legendary moment, seeking a foothold of understanding into how such courage could emerge from bloodshed and blindness. In the North Carolina city of Durham, I walked back in time with Ann Atwater to those searing days a half-century ago when two so unlike drew together and as the Klan chief later said, "the whole world was openin' up." Each age has its unsung heroes, each in a way repeats our sins. I was searching for clues to how we can unlock our gated minds.

In 1971, Atwater was fighting as tirelessly for the city's black poor as C.P. Ellis was working to destroy them. They had met on plenty of battlegrounds; she had once pulled a knife on him. Across the nation, the lie

of racial harmony built on segregation was crumbling amidst sit-ins, boycotts and marches. Fears of a conflagration were rising, when Atwater and Ellis were asked to co-chair 10 days of town meetings to prepare a reluctant city to begin court-ordered school desegregation. At first, neither would address the other. The second night, they talked, and wept for the fate of their children; and it might have ended there, with a nod and an encounter or two. But when he retreated to the shelter of his old ways, she, to everyone's surprise, protected him. (*Is ruthless victory over those opposed to us our goal?*, Martin Luther King asked in 1960 from a Durham pulpit. "No," he said. "As we protest, our ultimate aim is not to defeat or humiliate the white man but to win his friendship and understanding.") As the meetings drew to a close, Atwater invited in a gospel choir and Ellis responded with a display of hate: photos of the KKK burning crosses, white supremacist brochures and Nazi armbands. Darkness fell and a knot of

by Maggie Jackson

angry black teens was heading his way, when Atwater blocked the door. *Leave that alone*, she shouted. *If you want to know where a person is coming from... you got to see what makes him think what he thinks*. Step closer, she told the teens, and take a long look. What's on the other side of the divide? What are we failing to know?

Hatred, we might say, begins with a glance. Almost the instant that we cast our eyes upon others, we sort them into people who are like us – or not. And from that cognitive fork in the road, all else follows. We process the face of “our kind” more intensely and holistically, giving special heed to the eyes, and so are better able to recall that person as an individual. Faces of the *other*, in contrast, are paid scant attention; they “may not be ‘faces’ with the same intensity”, marvels one scientist. Now seen as a headwater of prejudice, this in-group bias, with its sweeping disregard for *others*, is prompted by almost any shade of difference, from race to class or political

hue. With one abbreviated look, we leave our understanding for the *other* at ‘category level’, ripe for labelling, stereotyping, and dehumanisation. To survive, we must continually categorise the world, yet perhaps there is no more volatile social moment than when we turn this wondrous capacity upon one another. A line in the sand is drawn, and those on the other side become shadow figures, seen as homogenous and cruelly distant from the gold standard of worth: ourselves.

That night, Atwater countered a gesture of retreat and contempt with the gift of deep regard, for someone she had all cause to fear and shun. She called on all around her to see the world from another's point of view, a folk wisdom revealed by decades of science as a quietly powerful antidote to prejudice. A milestone in a child's development and a social lubricant across relationships, the act of perspective-taking is perhaps most transformative in the dark realm of disregard, when we begin to contem-

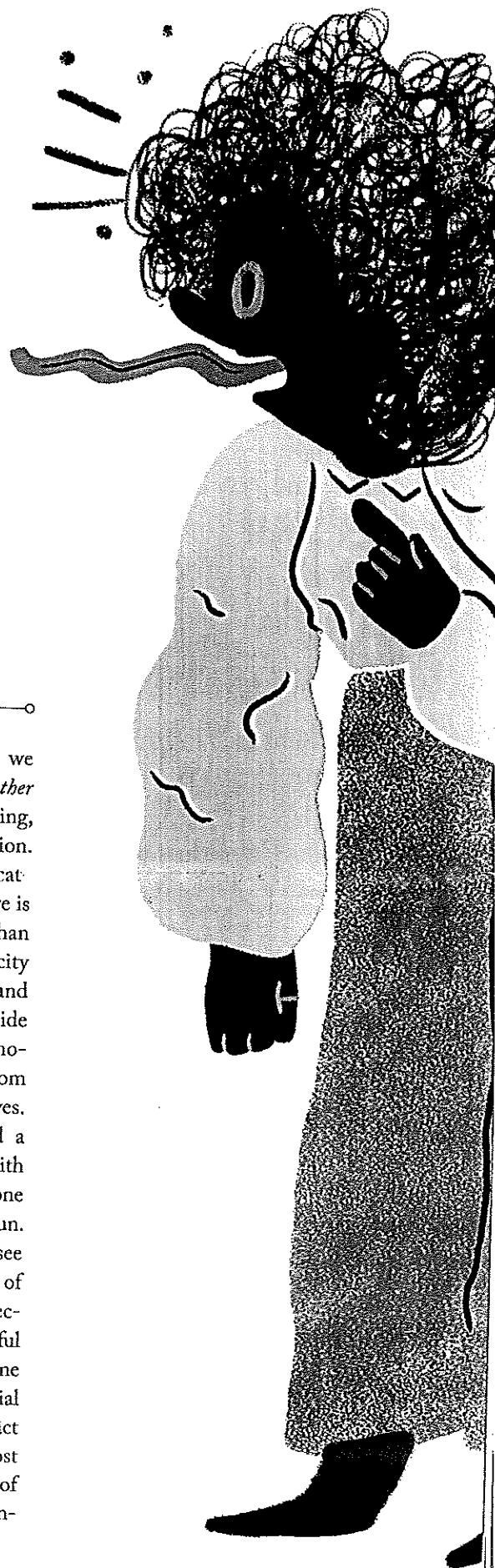


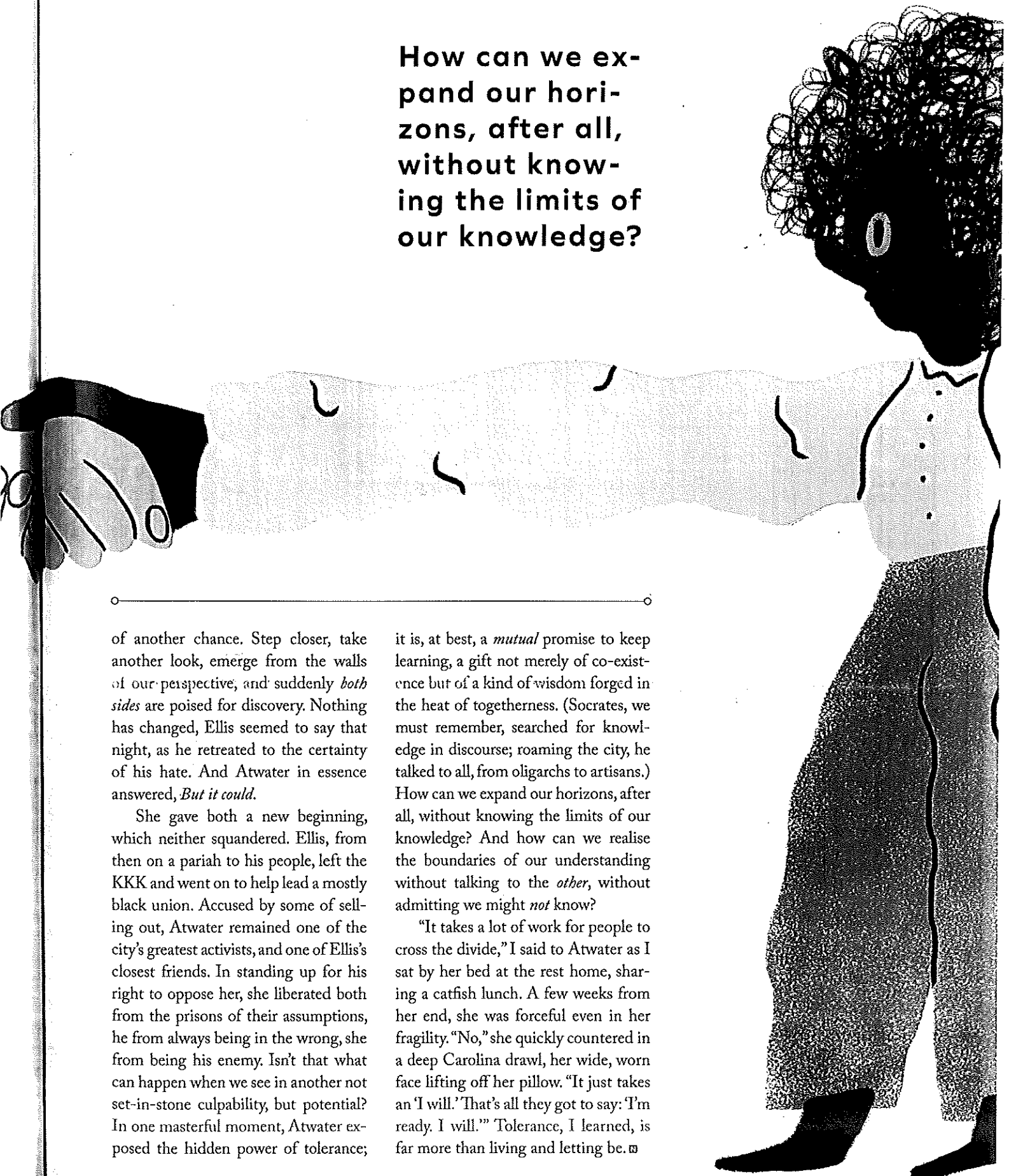


plate an *other*. It is the cognitive side of empathy, a complex reaching out not just for snatches of feeling but for fuller understanding. In one study, whites and Asians were told of a day in the life of a black man. Those asked to view "Robert's" actions – giving up his subway seat, swearing at a sales clerk – *objectively* later recalled 60 per cent more moments of aggression, a behaviour stereotypically linked to blacks, than incidents of kindness. But people who instead were coached to picture the world through *his* eyes, remembered about as much sweetness as anger in his behaviour. By evoking detail and context, perspective-taking fleshes out stereotypes and punctures our assumptions, lowering bias. Take a few moments to imagine life as a murderer or minority, and you likely will become more willing to sit closer, make eye contact with, and help those individuals – *and* others like

them, studies show. You begin to see a person worthy of connection.

Most remarkably, this reflective leap is mere speculation, born of a willingness to be uncertain, to admit that we might *not* know. It is, in essence, an echo of all that Socrates stood for as he traversed a divided Athens, its fragile experiment in *demokratia* giving way in his lifetime to a clashing of closed minds. "Don't you realise that errors in our conduct are caused by this kind of ignorance," Socrates asked a protégé, "of thinking that we know when we don't know?" Revisit one's convictions, step back from quick and easy assumptions, never stop asking questions: these were the core teachings of the ancient philosopher and the lessons of Atwater's actions that night. Both stood up for probing opposing views not to destroy or condone them, but as a means of offering something that we might call miraculous: the gift

## How can we expand our horizons, after all, without knowing the limits of our knowledge?



of another chance. Step closer, take another look, emerge from the walls of our perspective, and suddenly *both sides* are poised for discovery. Nothing has changed, Ellis seemed to say that night, as he retreated to the certainty of his hate. And Atwater in essence answered, *But it could.*

She gave both a new beginning, which neither squandered. Ellis, from then on a pariah to his people, left the KKK and went on to help lead a mostly black union. Accused by some of selling out, Atwater remained one of the city's greatest activists, and one of Ellis's closest friends. In standing up for his right to oppose her, she liberated both from the prisons of their assumptions, he from always being in the wrong, she from being his enemy. Isn't that what can happen when we see in another not set-in-stone culpability, but potential? In one masterful moment, Atwater exposed the hidden power of tolerance;

it is, at best, a *mutual* promise to keep learning, a gift not merely of co-existence but of a kind of wisdom forged in the heat of togetherness. (Socrates, we must remember, searched for knowledge in discourse; roaming the city, he talked to all, from oligarchs to artisans.) How can we expand our horizons, after all, without knowing the limits of our knowledge? And how can we realise the boundaries of our understanding without talking to the *other*, without admitting we might *not* know?

"It takes a lot of work for people to cross the divide," I said to Atwater as I sat by her bed at the rest home, sharing a catfish lunch. A few weeks from her end, she was forceful even in her fragility. "No," she quickly countered in a deep Carolina drawl, her wide, worn face lifting off her pillow. "It just takes an 'I will.' That's all they got to say: 'I'm ready. I will.'" Tolerance, I learned, is far more than living and letting be. ▣