IN THE MAZE

by Midge Meinertz

I N THE Administration Office they kept telling her that her name
wasn't enough. She had written it carefully, but it was all
wrong. Somehow they thought she was someone else, a basket-
ball player who had been suspected of kleptomania; but that was
because of the IBM card. It had a hole in it. Had she done that
dotting the "i" or crossing the "t?" You had to be so particular
not to change any rules; someone else would always be in charge of
that. Or was it her room number? No, that was her course number,
not to be confused with the time.

As she crossed the office threshold (absolute), the bell rang,
and she began to run. Operant conditioning. Funny, wasn't it,
how like the laboratory rats she ran? But they knew which food
was being offered at the end of the maze. Tolman cleverly worked
out a system of expected stimuli for them; rats can have a variable
movement response as long as they take familiar routes, and the
food is there. Her life had been spent along all the variable move-
ment responses, but she still wasn't sure if there had been any food.
What was at the end of the maze? Still, the bell was ringing, and
she would be late.

The family had been a maze. Hurry and grow up and find
your way out before time to come back and start another family!
Was there only another maze at the end of the maze? She began
to wonder who had made up this game and what the rules were;
she was tired of playing. Like the rat, looking for the reward at
the end of the labyrinth, she followed many blind alleyways. And
then she arrived at the University. The hunger to know when the
game would be over kept her there. Or was that really the problem?
The Guidance Councilor told her not to worry about the maze:
"Just learn how to get through it." (I'm still not sure I want to
grow up and become. Do maze people have names?)

The University had been very kind to open the gates for her.
Thirty years of experimenting proved that learning ability in rats
is hereditary (Thompson, 1954), and her parents had done very
well in the academic mazes of their generation. Searle concluded
that "brightness" and "dullness" strains were definitely a success:
they were specific to maze behavior—was there anything else?

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* Freshman Writing.

Learning how to "get through it" was not difficult: listen for the bells.

One day she thought she could smell the food at the end of the maze and readied herself to identify it, to turn in that direction. But the lab instructor changed the screens and put up the Requested Class Schedule to be passed on to the proper advisor for his approval as a prerequisite to indicating by the numbers 1, 2, or 3 her choice of time for registration. On the way to the approving dean's office, the breeze shifted, and coming through the cafeteria, it confused the smell. It didn't really matter. Just then the bell rang.

The maze was clean, and except for wondering about the unknown reward expectancy, she was not unhappy. (Even monkeys like to know what to look forward to. If they are anticipating bananas, they will turn down lettuce as a poor substitute.) No irregular trauma-inducing shocks disturbed her routine enough to permit her to formulate approach-avoidance conflicts or to develop an illness typical of rats who try to avoid trained ambivalence. There were pleasant days at the University, filled with enough positive reinforcement to lure her deeper into the maze, and inevitably she felt at home.

Experiments have shown that rats learn mazes more quickly if they can explore at liberty before introduction of stimuli. And if the end of the maze exists, and if she develops proper stimulus discrimination, the route to the reward will be, no doubt, familiar. It is good to be occupied with the preservation of virgin IBM cards, and she may like the bells. What if the game never stops? Maybe she won't be hungry after all. Who cares if she is a basketball player who has been suspected of kleptomania?

Rain and I are friends, you see
And in this troubled spot,
If my friend the rain is free
No one can say I'm not.
                    MILDRED BOURNE*

* Freshman Writing.