

The Inventory **FT Magazine**

## Q&A with experimental psychologist Steven Pinker

'My 20-year-old self would be surprised that I'm thrice-married and childless'



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**Steven Pinker, 63, is Johnstone Family professor in the department of psychology at Harvard. He conducts research on language and cognition. His books include *The Language Instinct*, *The Blank Slate* and *The Better Angels of Our Nature*.**

### **What was your childhood or earliest ambition?**

By high school, I knew that I wanted to teach and that I wanted to think. I had come across the term “think-tank” and vaguely wanted to work in one. My mother said, “The place for you is a university.”

### **Private school or state school? University or straight into work?**

State schools in Montreal, a bachelor's from McGill, then a lifetime ricocheting between Harvard and MIT.

### **Who was or still is your mentor?**

I learnt experimental psychology from Stephen Kosslyn, linguistic theory from Joan Bresnan, and psycholinguistics (and prose style) from Roger Brown. But I'm not much of a mentee: I've always gathered ideas and methods from far and wide.

**How physically fit are you?**

I've always tried to keep fit through cycling, jogging, hiking and kayaking — any aerobic exercise in which scenery goes by.

**Ambition or talent: which matters more to success?**

They multiply.

**In what place are you happiest?**

In my house in Cape Cod, with my wife, the novelist and philosopher Rebecca Newberger Goldstein.

**What would you like to own that you don't currently possess?**

A single-digit inbox.

**What's your biggest extravagance?**

A Leica Rangefinder. It's medium-tech at best, and seriously overpriced, but beautiful in a boxy Bauhaus way, and it makes photography a sensuous experience.

**What ambitions do you still have?**

I always have several book possibilities floating in the back of my mind. But my greatest ambition is to write on some topic I never dreamed I'd ever write about.

**What drives you on?**

Deep explanations and elegant language.

**How politically committed are you?**

Having plotted so much data on human progress, I've become a radical incrementalist and a passionate centrist. Liberal democracy and international institutions are precious accomplishments and well worth fighting for.

**What is the greatest achievement of your life so far?**

*The Better Angels of Our Nature* (2011). It surprised readers with the little-known yet momentous fact that violence is in historical decline; defined a political goal (to identify the causes of our progress and intensify them); and challenged me to tell a particularly complex story in a compelling way.

### **What do you find most irritating in other people?**

Bickering. The cost of conflict — in trust and long-term reciprocity — is almost always greater than whatever's being fought over.

### **If your 20-year-old self could see you now, what would he think?**

He'd be surprised that I'm thrice-married and childless, relieved that I landed a tenured professorship, and delighted that I crossed over into writing for a wide audience.

### **Which object that you've lost do you wish you still had?**

Effortless memory for details.

### **What is the greatest challenge of our time?**

The greatest practical challenge is avoiding catastrophic [climate change](#). The greatest moral and political challenge is defending the Enlightenment ideals of reason, science, humanism and progress.

### **Do you believe in an afterlife?**

No. The mind depends entirely on the brain, which is indisputably mortal. I'd add that the concept of an afterlife is morally troubling. It implies that health and happiness are not such a big deal, because life on earth is an infinitesimal portion of one's existence. Every moment in our finite span of consciousness is something to savour.

### **If you had to rate your satisfaction with your life so far, out of 10, what would you score?**

Given the possibilities for suffering and misfortune that come with being human, it would be an act of cosmic ingratitude for me to answer with anything less than 10.

*"Enlightenment Now: The Case for Reason, Science, Humanism, and Progress" by Steven Pinker is published by Allen Lane*

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