



Neuron Neurosis

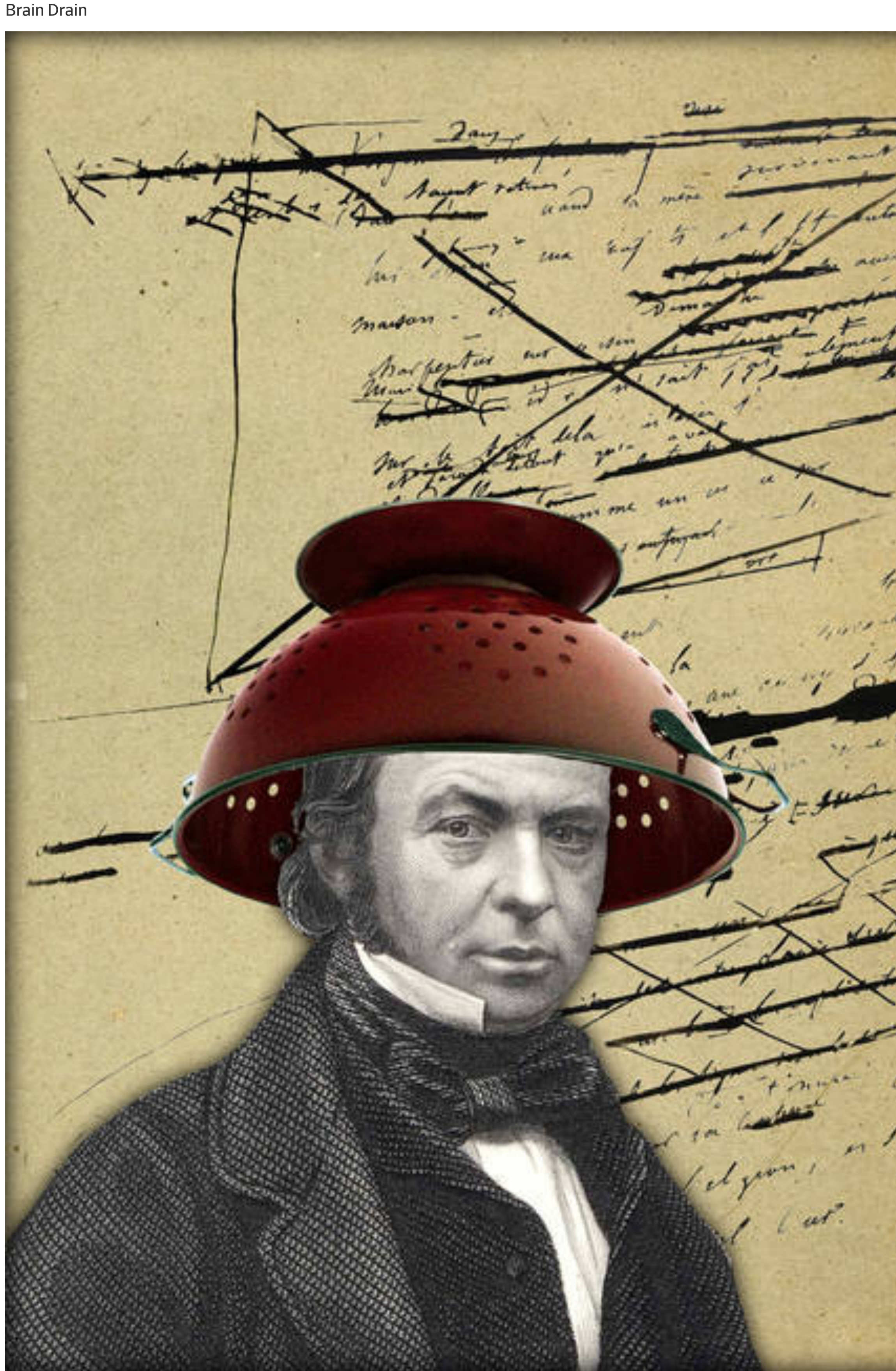
Slid into an MRI, the author wonders, 'Is this what it feels like to be a piece of paper being photocopied?'

By Edward Kosner
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22

Brain Drain



'Memory' (1959), a collage by Solange Gautier.

PHOTO: ART RESOURCE, NY

When I was in elementary school, my mother came home after lunch with my teacher one day—they used to share the same luncheonette—and reported that my IQ was 179. That would put me higher than Einstein (160), Mozart (165) and Rembrandt (155), by some retrospective calculation, but inferior to Bobby Fischer (186) or Galileo (185). No intellectual or professional achievement of mine has ever reflected that number, though it remains a family legend.

So I know how Patricia Marx, the author of "Let's Be Less Stupid," feels. I was already in trouble in the introduction to her jokey new meditation on the aging brain. I whiffed on four out of five of the warm-up questions. (I still think I'm right on puzzler No. 1: "Which one of the five is least like the others: dog, mouse, lion, snake, elephant?") I chose the reptile among the mammals, but the "right" answer is mouse, unless it's a typo) I also had to use a magnifying glass to read the small print—"RAGE against Verizon," "Headache—or MAD cow disease?????"—in her hand-drawn diagram "Inside Patty's Brain" on page 1.

LET'S BE LESS STUPID

By Patricia Marx
Twelve, 188 pages, \$22

But all the effort was instructive, in a way. At the end of this slim volume, I was persuaded that it would be hopeless for me to try to be less stupid because I never was that smart to begin with—Miss Kafka's lunchtime leak to my mother notwithstanding. Otherwise, I would have figured out in one of her tests that a gallon of horse semen (\$6,032) costs 10 times as much as a gallon of Wite-Out (\$601.60). Or that the first Paleolithic diet followed the Ice Age but preceded the Bronze Age.

Ms. Marx, a writer for the New Yorker and a former writer for "Saturday Night Live," fills the first part of her book with such humiliating quizzes and gives the brain-depleted useful advice on subjects you can blithely ignore. One sketch of her head helpfully labeled "What You No Longer Need to Know" includes "How to program your VCR" and "the Dewey Decimal System." Another, called "Unremember Everything You Learned at School," lists "Sentence/diagramming" and "Mitosis or Meiosis?"

There are plays that Shakespeare may have written or script-doctored, among them "Love's Labors Won" and "King John" (she might have added "Cardenio" and "Two Noble Kinsmen"). Presidents to forget: "William Henry Ho-hum Harrison." And wars not worth remembering, especially the War of Jenkins' Ear, fought by the English and Spanish in the 1730s and '40s, which was overtaken by the War of the Austrian Succession, another one to forget.

Along the way, the author chips in any number of beguiling factoids definitely worth remembering if you can. One of my favorites: The brains of London cabdrivers who have memorized "The Knowledge"—the map of the city's more than 25,000 streets and countless monuments—have larger hippocampi than those of bus drivers, who only have to learn a few routes. Another: Women with ring fingers as long as or longer than their index fingers are good at navigation. And: Doing crosswords for years doesn't keep your brain sharper. This was especially disappointing to me, because completing the crossword in "Let's Be Less Stupid" was one of the few tasks I aced.

One key metric in the brain game must have slipped Ms. Marx's mind. I call it the retrieval interval. That's the time it takes you to disinter some fact, restaurant name, actor's role or such from your once-hard mental drive. The interval can be as short as a hiccup: Who's that Frenchman who wrote that big book about income inequality? Jean-Luc Picard. No, he's the "Star Trek" commander. Thomas Piketty! Or it may last until a 3 a.m. revelation: Who are the only baseball players to play for the Giants, Dodgers, Yankees and Mets? Darryl Strawberry, José Vizcaino and Ricky Ledee. Or somewhere in between: Who was that guy who ran for president and got photographed looking stupid in a tank turret? Michael Dukakis. What year was that? Can you give me a second?

After the no-fun and games, the meat of Ms. Marx's book is a conscientious effort to calibrate the state of her IQ, map her brain with an MRI and measure its functionality at her current age—which she doesn't give, but she graduated from Harvard in 1975, so figure it out, smartie—and then to retest herself after industrious months trying to, well, be less stupid.

The process starts inauspiciously. She is slid into an MRI tube at Stanford, the scanning din begins and she wonders: "Is this what it feels like to be a piece of paper being photocopied?" Although you can't cram for an IQ test, Ms. Marx warms up with some free online versions, then has a specialist at NYU administer the Wechsler Adult Intelligence Scale. She tries to figure out what the opposite faces of complicated block designs look like, repeats strings of numbers backward, and fiddles with the Tower of Hanoi, a puzzle involving disks of different sizes arranged on three rods. After four hours of this, she has her current IQ, but doesn't find it out, nor does the reader.

With her baselines established, she sets out to upgrade her brain by road-testing every authenticated and cockamamie cognitive-enhancement game, system or treatment she can find. She compiles a list of brain-fitness products, including Brain Spa, NeuroNation and HAPPYneuron but settles on the Lumosity training program "liked" so much on Facebook. The timed games designed to improve her memory, attention, speed of processing, flexibility or problem-solving ability make her feel bad.

She then tries exercise, which can stimulate hormone production that activates genes involved in learning and memory, and meditation to make that trusty hippocampus denser. She even buys a gizmo called the Fisher Wallace Stimulator, affixes the wet-sponge electrodes to her temples and pulses electricity from two AA batteries through her noggin for 20 minutes every day. She also practices piano scales and downs little green Mental Clarity pills on the advice of a (supposed) friend.

When she discovers somewhere that the average age of dementia among people who speak at least two languages is 75.5, compared with 71.4 for monolinguals, she embarks on her most ambitious stab at brain rehab. She decides to learn Cherokee, which she initially confuses with Navajo, the language used by the celebrated code-talkers that so befuddled the Japanese in World War II. Actually, she just tries to memorize the 85 characters representing syllables in Cherokee. At the end of the chapter, she provides a handy grid for translating useful phrases like "Does my big toe look infected?" into the language of Chief Buckeye and his proud tribe.

After nearly four months of Lumosity, Mental Clarity, Cherokee and the rest, the author returns to Stanford for fresh MRIs of her retrained brain and gets her IQ retested at NYU.

The results? Eureka! The Stanford researcher reports that certain areas of her brain have grown by as much as 33%. Better yet, the functionality test found a 47% increase in brain activation. Now the bad news: Even with Ms. Marx's expanded, tuned-up brain abuzz with functionality, the NYU psychologist finds that her IQ has . . . declined slightly.

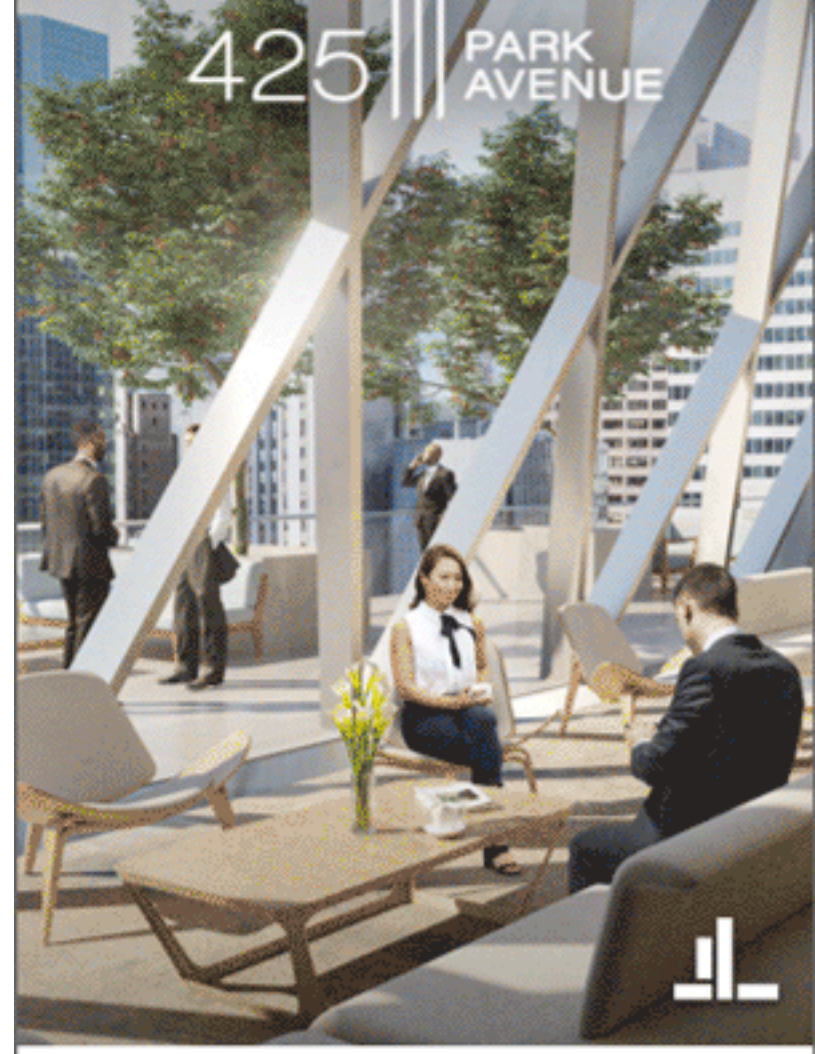
Undaunted, she decides to change her name from Patty to the more cerebral Patricia and plod on—older, but no wiser.

—Mr. Kosner is the former editor of Newsweek, New York, Esquire and the New York Daily News.

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BACK TO TOP ▲