Earlier this year the New Yorker magazine ran an article in its Talk of the Town section describing a unique party given for a unique individual by patients he had cared for over several generations. The guest of honor at that affair was our own Editorial Director, Dr. Milton I. Levine.

We believe it to be a wonderful tribute, and offer it for your reading pleasure.

Pediatric Party

From what we hear, the party of the year was a balloon-and-hero-sandwich blast thrown by several hundred children and ex-children for their favorite baby doctor, and here is a report on doctor and party from a mother we know who attended the occasion with a nearly-six-year-old daughter (in new Mary Janes and hand-me-down smocked velvet):

You know, of course, about Dr. Milton Levine. He is the dean of New York pediatricians. The famous baby doctor. The “other” baby doctor, as Dr. Spock people call him. Being seventy-two and going strong, Milton Levine is famous on quite a number of counts. Writer: “The Parents’ Encyclopedia” (strictly for parents), “A Baby Is Born,” “The Wonder of Life.” Editor: Pediatric Annals. Teacher: “Pulmonary Diseases and Anomalies of Infancy and Childhood.” Newspaper columnist. Television sage. Etc. But mostly he is famous as the doctor who brought loving back into child care. If Benjamin Spock spells Permissiveness (whatever that means), Milton Levine spells Hugs, Kisses, Cuddles. He is a man of the happiness-is-a-warm-parent school, a pioneer in the

healing power of mother love. Largely responsible for, among other things, the fact that parents in New York can visit children in a hospital every day (it was once a week in 1929, when Dr. Levine started practicing) and that mothers can spend the night in the hospital after a child’s operation. Also, really, for the fact that now it is considered quite O.K., and even good, for a mother to pick up a crying baby, hold a feeding baby, and lavish affection on a baby. One of his own heroes was Dr. Heinrich Finkelstein, an illustrious Berlin pediatrician of the nineteen-tens and twenties, who always had a big, fat nurse on hand, a nurse with the most extravagantly comforting bosom he could find, to cuddle marasmic infants while they took their bottles. His archenemy was the behaviorist John B. Watson, who dictated the methods by which susceptible American parents a few generations back raised their offspring. (I’ve done homework. Here are a few choice Watsonisms, copied from the book my mother swore by: “There is a sensible way of treating children. . . . Never hug and kiss them, never let them sit in your lap. . . . Shake hands with them in the morning. Give them a pat on the head if they have made an extraordinarily good job of a difficult task. Try it out. . . . You will be utterly ashamed of the mawkish, sentimental

way you have been handling it. . . . If your heart is too tender and you must watch the child, make yourself a peephole so that you can see it without being seen, or use a periscope . . . and, finally, learn not to talk in endearing and coddling terms.”) Anyway, Dr. Levine was one of the first to call all this nonsense. My daughter, who is well travelled, has checked out doctors in four states and five countries, and her loyalty to Dr. Levine is absolute. It was no surprise to me that one of the Doctor’s old children — Susan Komarov, who has three of her own now — called up some other old children and said it was high time they had a party for Dr. Levine. Or that the Doctor’s head office technician — known to the world as Harriet the Shot Giver — spent the next six months rummaging through her files to track down people who might have moved a dozen times since Dr. Levine pronounced them grownups and sent them off into the gloomy world of specialists. Or, for that matter, that several hundred of them chipped in and turned up in the auditorium of the Walden School one recent Sunday afternoon to celebrate.

The auditorium was positively festooned: Bright-red balloons, with “Twinkle Twinkle Little Car” printed on them. (Dr. L., who sings while thumping backs and chests, always

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sings "car," so that his children can have the pleasure of saying, "No, Star, silly!") Splendid murals of the Doctor's life: (compliments of the Children's Committee). Blown-up photographs. Fresh flowers. Six-foot sandwiches. Delectable pastries from Mangano's. Wine, Coke. The general din of children. A teen-age rock combo playing "Twinkle Twinkle" with some staggering electronic amplification. And a persistent sound of snacks as everybody kissed the Doctor, and met his wife, his daughters, and their children. We all ate and played, and then, up on the stage, there was a little ceremony. Many speeches. One from a doctor named Lester Coleman, who takes out tonsils. One from Dr. Levine's first patient. Then one from Dr. Levine, who told stories about children. When Dr. L. produced a bright-green ocarina from one pocket and said he'd play, many of the younger children at the party clambered up onto the stage. Dr. Levine has a famous passion for ocarinas. He told me, when I got him alone toward the end of the party, that he owns thirty-five, the first dating from his high-school days, when he didn't have much money and wanted to play something, and went into a music store and asked for the cheapest instrument they had. Then, seeing me scribbling, he told me more about himself.

Dr. Levine grew up in Spokane. Moved to New York in 1917. Heard that war had been declared — the First World War — on the train. His father, a Reform rabbi, died before he was fifty, leaving the mother with five children to support. Young Milton Levine worked his way through City College, then Cornell Medical, selling books and doing window-dressing at Brentano's. He loved invertebrate zoology, and nearly became a biologist. He decided on pediatrics one day in the wards of St. Mary's Free Hospital for Children, in Hell's Kitchen. "I can't stand to see children suffering, and in those days medicine was very cruel to children," he said. "At St. Mary's, no one ever held the children. At my own hospital — New York Nursery and Child Hospital — they did hold the babies during feedings, but, as I recall, their thought on that was simply that a baby who was held upright bubbled better. Those were the Watm days. Doctors thought that holding a baby was overstimulation, when actually a baby who is cuddled and held gets a great deal of warm, necessary stimulation. They thought that parents in general were overstimulating and interfered with the healing process. That's why they let parents visit their children in the hospital only once a week. It was awful to see. I fought it. They must have thought I was crazy at St. Mary's. I tasted every formula of every baby every morning, because sometimes, you know, the milk gets burned, and then it has a funny taste and the baby won't like it. And I spoke out against cruelty. Over the years, I continued speaking out. I was sure that a baby was never spoiled by attention. A baby who is never sure if his parents will come when he cries — that's the baby who'll be in trouble. I wanted my babies to be happy. I brought back a lot of breast feeding at a time when most doctors were saying that women should realize that they're not cows. Another thing I brought back was pacifiers. I took thirty-two babies with colic and gave them pacifiers, and the colic was cured in twenty-eight of them. I fought so that mothers could spend the night with a hospitalized child, because I knew that a small, sick child needs his mother, and does much better with his mother around. Until my own hospital changed its rules, I wouldn't send kids to it who were scheduled for hernia operations. I'd send them over to Mt. Sinai, where a mother could stay one night and take her child home in the morning. Then, when I had more authority, I started putting orders in the order book at New York Hospital: 'Mother Stays Overnight.' Eventually, everyone was scared to argue with me. I remember once I had a ten-month-old baby hospitalized with severe diarrhea. I came up to the floor to see him and found the mother outside the room, crying. 'The nurse made me leave,' she told me. I said, 'You just come right in here.' She did. And when the nurse saw her she the nurse put the baby down, pulled up the crib slats, and stormed out. I followed her. I said, 'Listen. This mother loves her baby very much. She's anxious, because her baby is sick — sick enough to be brought into a hospital. When a child is sick and unhappy and hurt, it doesn't want a stranger. It wants Mommy.' Well, it's the rule now — children in the hospital can have their parents. Right now, what I very much want is for children to be able to see their mothers when their mothers are in the hospital for maternity. Otherwise, the child can feel abandoned. The mother disappears and comes home with a new baby, and the older child thinks, What's the matter — wasn't I good enough? You see, I'd do anything to keep a child from suffering."

Dr. Levine stopped talking and looked around at his patients, eating, laughing, talking. "You know, some of the mothers here were among the first patients of mine to have heart surgery. And some of these children have had open-heart surgery within the last six months, and now they're riding, skiing, going to parties. Look at them. Perfectly healthy children. You know, I'm so glad to be practicing now — not in some romantic Middle Ages, not even twenty years in the future. This has been the golden age of medicine. These are children — some of them — whose lives I saved, children who would have died when I started practicing. That was before sulfa, before antibiotics, before most injections. Children got pneumonia and empyema. Terrible abscesses in the throat. One of the first things you learned as an intern was how to hold a baby upside down and lance a throat abscess. Those were the days when every pediatrician carried a little knife in order to pierce ear infections. The days when a blood culture that showed a strep or a staph was a death warrant. Nephritis was dreaded. Polio was dreaded. Well, it's all changed now. We can save thousands of children now, and that makes pediatrics a joy."