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The Country's Doctor

After teaching parents to trust their instincts, Spock showed their children how to grow old without going stale.

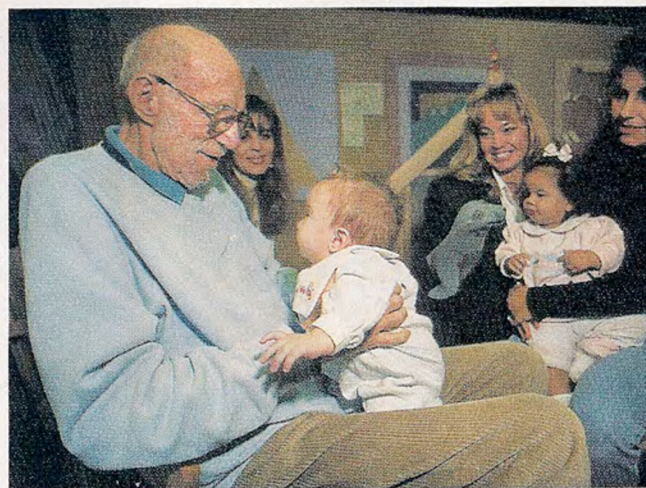
By **Kenneth Miller** Photography by **Dana Fineman**

TWO HOURS BEFORE DAWN ON A Saturday morning, in the cramped cabin of a Winnebago motor home, the world's most famous baby doctor is standing on his head. His feet, at the end of a long, gaunt body, nearly brush the van's Formica ceiling. His white-bearded face is perfectly serene; the doctor looks a good deal younger than his 93 years. The vehicle is parked a few miles north of San Diego, on a promontory 50 feet above the booming Pacific. Over the past week, torrential rains have triggered mudslides across California. A cliff like this one collapsed yesterday, killing two men. But the doctor is unimpressed. "From the reverent way they speak of it," he says after his wife helps him turn right side up, "you'd think it was Noah's flood."

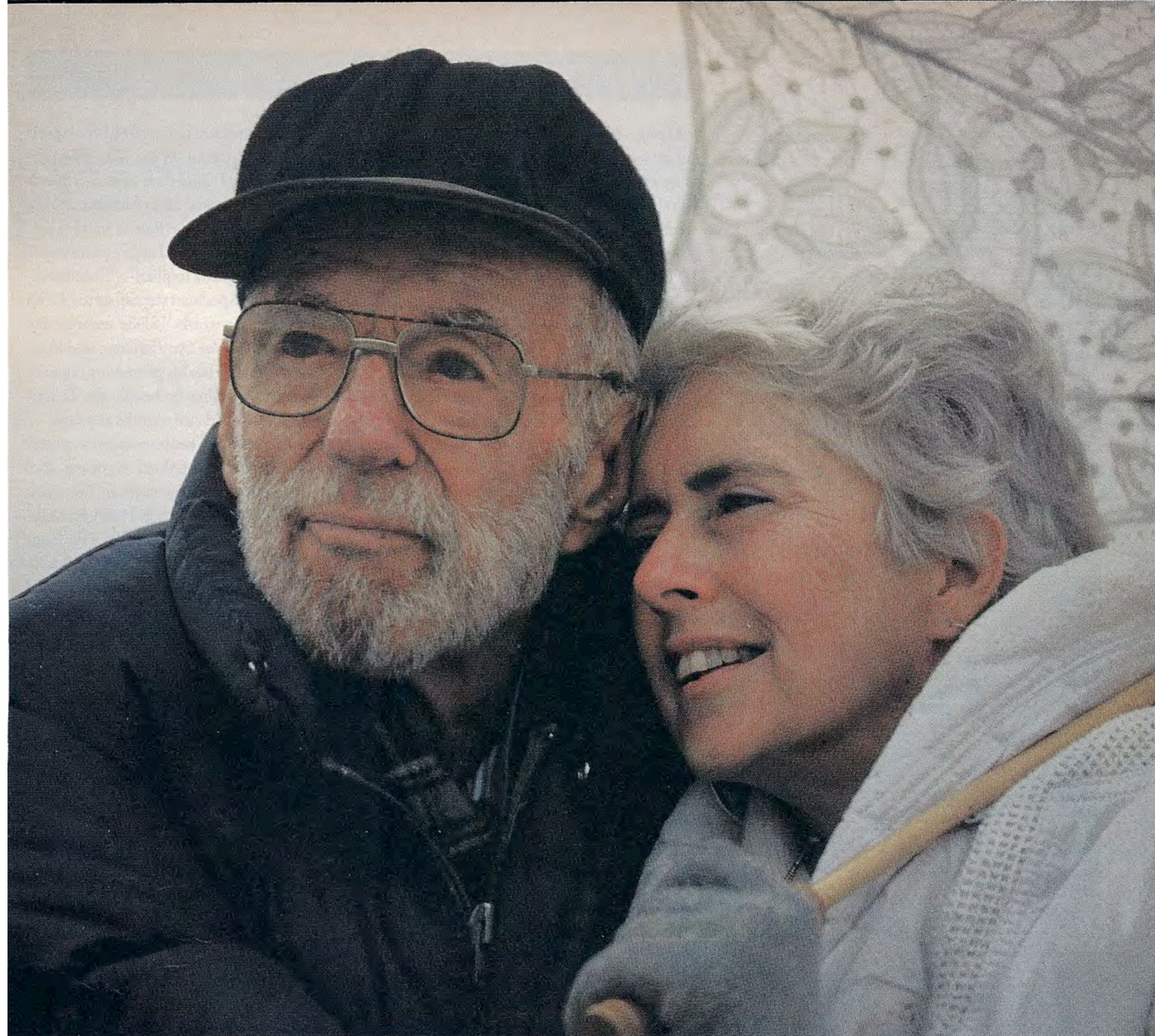
Living on the edge is nothing new to Dr. Benjamin Spock. In 1946 his *Baby and Child Care* challenged half a century's worth of dogma—the warnings from experts that babies must be fed on a rigid schedule, that they must never be hugged or kissed, that they would be ruined forever if parents obeyed their own instincts. ("No one today knows enough to raise a child," wrote John B. Watson, a reigning authority, in 1928.) Spock's manual offered advice on everything from croup to sibling rivalry, in casual, good-humored prose. The book incorporated, without jargon, the radical insights of John Dewey and Sigmund Freud. Its most earthshaking sentences, however, came at the very start: "Trust yourself. You know more than you think you do."

With those 10 words, Spock set off a revolution in child rearing—or rather, he gave a brewing revolution shape and force. American moms and dads, just emerging from a grim era of Depression and war, saw in their kids the hope of a regenerated world. They longed to give their offspring what they themselves had often been denied—not only material goods but tenderness, respect, spontaneous fun. And when a fatherly pediatrician pronounced such impulses healthy, parents hailed him as a middle-class Moses. Many scrambled for his scripture whenever a tantrum erupted, trusting themselves only with instructions in hand; some took his injunction to "enjoy your baby" as license to abandon discipline altogether. Despite the zealots' excesses, Spock's teachings attained the status of established wisdom. By now, the much-revised *Baby and Child Care* has sold more copies than any other volume except the Bible. Every parenting guide published since has had to contend with it, as has every child born in the industrialized nations in the past five decades.

Spock's way with kids and his liberal parenting theories owe much to harsh memories of his own strict upbringing.



Even if he had left the public eye on the day the book debuted, the doctor's place among the century's great cultural liberators (Freud and Dewey, but also Elvis and the Beatles) would have been



assured. As it happened, Spock became one of the great media heroes, too—icon of nurturance, trustworthiness and common sense; adviser to Presidents; perennial TV talking head. Equally remarkable, though, was his metamorphosis into quite another sort of hero. Determined to save America's children from political as well as parental oppression, Spock risked his reputation, his fortune and his freedom for a set of unpopular beliefs. By the mid-1960s, this onetime Republican had evolved from a New Deal Democrat into a New Left opponent of the Vietnam war. Spock spoke at dozens of demonstrations and was arrested at several, his three-piece suit distinguishing him from his scruffy fellow protesters; he spent one memorable night in the Manhattan jail known as the Tombs, with poet Allen Ginsberg leading "om" chants. In 1968 the government indicted Spock for conspiracy to abet resistance to the draft. (His conviction was overturned on appeal, but his critics, led by evangelist Norman Vincent Peale, judged him guilty of a greater crime: responsibility for the unruliness of '60s youth.) In 1972 he ran for President on the utopian People's Party ticket, netting 80,000 votes. In the '80s he was still attending sit-ins against nuclear arms and social injustice, and still getting busted.

Spock's exploits earned him honorary membership in the rebel generation his revolution

"Living with Ben has taught me patience," says Mary Morgan, Spock's wife and caretaker. "If I didn't have my own identity, it'd be a problem."

shaped—the baby boomers. His knack for self-reinvention also made him a model for youth-obsessed boomers, showing them how to age without growing uncool. In the '70s, when his first marriage failed and the women's movement blasted *Baby and Child Care* as sexist, Spock nimbly refurbished the book and himself along egalitarian lines. He wed Mary Morgan, a feisty Arkansas feminist 41 years his junior, who acts today as his manager and editor as well as chef, nurse, chauffeur, spiritual adviser and loving gadfly. At her insistence, and with a counselor's help, Spock transformed himself from a harsher parent than his texts implied—"Permissiveness was *not* the thing," says his eldest son, Michael—into a truly Spockian stepfather to Mary's daughter. He continued to update his ideas and to pump out words. (Since entering his nineties, he has published his political valediction, *A Better World for Our Children,* and inaugurated a column on the Internet.) Guided by his wife, he took up a health-preserving regimen involving yoga, massage and an austere macrobiotic diet. At her urging, he bought the 22-foot Winnebago, aboard which the couple explore California's back roads for months at a time.

Still, nothing—not a young wife, not travel, not headstands—can keep senescence entirely at bay. "For the last two or three years," Spock says, "I've had to admit that I'm getting old." A former Olympic oarsman (his team took the gold at Paris in 1924), he walks slowly now, with a shuffle. His Connecticut Yankee drawl has dwindled to a near-whisper. He has endured a mild stroke, a minor heart attack, bouts of pneumonia. And he suffers, occasionally, from an old man's regrets.

Spock and Morgan lived largely aboard sailboats until he was 89. Despite his ailments, they still spend half of each year as vagabonds on land.

"Old geezers," he concedes, "are always talking about how things were better when they were young." But today's parents, his beloved boomers, have disappointed him badly. No longer '60s idealists, they've grown obsessed with their careers, he says. They offer their kids junk food, violent TV shows and gory video games. They send them to mind-numbing schools and set a bad example by commercializing sex. They get divorced with alarming frequency. (Spock waited, he points out, until his children were grown.) The doctor has aired his despair over the state of parenting in his latest essays and has suggested some solutions: more emphasis on spiritual values; less time at the office for parents who can afford it and subsidized daycare for those who can't; more political activism on behalf of children; exercise, meditation and healthy eating for all. "I wanted to write about these things," he says, "before I kicked the bucket."

Yet for all his discontents, Spock counts himself a happy man. He has watched his own kids, after long and sometimes troubled self-exploration, establish careers and families. (Michael, 64, ran the Children's Museum in Boston for many years and is now a consultant and researcher on children's nonacademic learning processes in Chicago; John, 53, is an architect in Los Angeles.) And he knows the influence his work has had around the globe.

Asked if he believes in an afterlife, Spock shakes his head. "But I do have a feeling that everything good that you do in the world will outlast you. Forty million people," he says, referring to the sales figures for *Baby and Child Care.* "That's a lot of people to help. And when they come up and say, 'You helped me raise two fine children,' that's plenty for me. I can die in peace." But it's not time yet. The rain has stopped, and Mary is gunning the engine. ▭