Michael Taviss

An unfavorable chain reaction

"Dear Reader:

This is a chain article. Make five copies of this article and send it to your five best friends. Within a week, with luck, another article will appear.

Just a short time ago I received an example of that most obnoxious piece of junk mail known as the chain letter. This representative of the breed was particularly offensive. Not only was it written by a computer, thus proving that computers do not have intelligence, but it ignored the standard motivation of chain letters completely. There was no element of greed involved at all; i.e., there was no mention of money.

What, then, was the reward offered by this misguided, mischievous misdeed? I was told that if I didn't break the chain I would soon be the recipient of oodles and oodles of good luck. How, you may ask, did the originators of the chain plan to carry out the payoff? Do they have a direct line to Lady Luck? That might not be so far wrong. If the religious inscription at the head of the letter is to be believed, they have a direct line to someone far more powerful — God. I refuse to consider on the ridiculousness of this, except to note that if the Almighty has to stoop to sending chain letters to prospective worshippers He's in worse shape than I thought.

What really burned me was the whole threat that death would accompany my breaking the chain. Well, I'm afraid I'm still alive. Maybe I shouldn't say that. Several chain writing fanatics might be on my trail now that they know who broke their chain.

I will admit that this variant on the typical money grubbing chain letter was interesting to read. You must admit that the chain letter concept leaves room for many possibilities. For example, imagine if you will, a chain letter telling all who received it to send five copies to friends, and a dime to the name on the top of the list. With no restraint clause, that person would soon become very rich. If the name happened to be Ed King, the state of Massachusetts would be out of financial difficulty before you could say 'balanced budget.'

There are other examples. I quote one here, taken from the book Work Hard and You Shall be Rewarded — Urban Folklore from the Paperwork Empire by Alice Dunades and Carl R. Pagter.

Dear Friend:

This chain letter was started by a man like yourself in the hope it will bring relief. This does not cost you anything. Kindly send a copy of this letter to five of your friends who seem equally tired and disillusioned. (Please turn to page 5).

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AIA PAGE 4 THE TECH TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 27, 1979

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