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Knowledge and Information in a Media-Saturated World

FOR MOST OF HUMAN HISTORY, knowledge was communicated orally by specific members of the community who were known and trusted. With the invention of writing, knowledge began to separate from its source. An author no longer directly controlled her/his ideas, nor could the reader consult the author to clarify meaning.

In an analogous way, the invention of the printing press undercut the sacredness of the handwritten word. While the authority of knowledge was still important, it was no longer filtered through religious and secular authorities. The printing press allowed people to have a personal relationship with the written word and decide the authority of texts based upon their own political, economic, social, and religious criteria.

By the second half of the 20th century, radio and especially television had added a new twist to the way in which people received knowledge and information. The need of a complex society for timely information and knowledge raised the commodity value of information and knowledge; radio and television stations gradually became part of large corporations. Even so there was an authoritative filtering process to vouch for the creditability of information based on a general understanding of how knowledge was created and published. People might not trust the New York Times or NBC news, but they were able to base their decisions on a relatively straightforward understanding of these institutions and the conventions of mainstream journalism and the publishing industry. They could use that understanding of to critique what they saw and read.

Much of this scene changed with the Internet. For the first time in history, print and audio-visual media are communicated directly from the creator to the reader/viewer without the mediation of a publisher or broadcaster. This situation has led to a glut of information and knowledge available instantly from anywhere in the world.

The Information Landscape

TODAY, INFORMATION AND KNOWLEDGE gush from many sources. Books, magazines, scholarly journals, and newspapers are in print and online. Most libraries provide home access to full-text periodical and reference databases and electronic books. In addition, many of these database producers also sell individual subscriptions to the public. There is also a host of information that starts and ends its life online. Government, non-profit, educational, commercial, and personal websites provide access to billions of web pages. There are thousands of newsgroups and e-mail listservs. Just recently we have seen the explosion of blogs. We also have access to hundreds of commercial and non-commercial television and radio stations.

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In a world filled with so much information and knowledge, one can easily become overwhelmed and confused. What information should one trust? How does one know if the information is legitimate, especially when so much of it appears contradictory? And how does one know where to start looking in the first place? With knowledge and information available in multiple formats, what does it mean to be literate? These concerns heighten when access to information and its forms changes radically every few years.

The new world of information and knowledge demands high-level critical evaluation by individuals. This evaluation begins with an understanding of the political, economic, and social contexts in which information is produced and distributed. Powerful institutions and individuals with vested economic and political interests shape the information landscape. Five media corporations—AOL/Time Warner, Disney, Viacom, News Corporation/Fox, and Bertelsmann—along with General Electric own the majority of television and radio networks, movie studios, media production companies, book and magazine publishers, telecommunications and Internet news services. These few corporations shape much of the content that we view and read and provide the framework in which news and information are presented.

These media giants pursue high profit margins for their shareholders. Maximizing profits and staving off competition requires large portfolios of television, radio, and movie studios as well as production facilities, book, magazine and newspaper publishers, and telecommunications and Internet companies. If the desired companies cannot be acquired, then joint ventures are formed. Cross-ownership and cross-promotion of media and information commodities are the name of the game.

Thinking, Learning, and Education

GIVEN THE OVERWHELMING AMOUNT of information available and the corporate nature of mainstream information, what does the average citizen need to know to be media- and information-literate? In turn, what is the role of our educational system in providing the knowledge and tools necessary to help citizens navigate the “information society”?

The first thing that literate persons in the “information age” need to know is where they stand in the political,

economic, and social/cultural landscape. Before we decide why we trust an information source, we must understand the context in which the source exists as well as the interests it serves and seeks to promote. Much of the confusion that citizens experience over what they receive from the media is due to the complexity of the media and the centers of power behind it. There is a pervasive myth in the United States that the media are free and open. While it is true that our media are not directly controlled or censored by the state, media control does exist in America in subtle and indirect ways.

Literate citizens need to understand that the production, distribution, and organization of knowledge takes place mostly within large centralized institutions that exist within a competitive global capitalist economy. Whatever you think of global markets, the fact is they are composed of institutions and ideologies that directly shape the information landscape. If citizens wish to make sense of the information and knowledge they encounter every day—on television, on radio, on the Internet, and in print—then they must learn how marketing strategies govern these institutions.

Information created by media corporations is protected by a series of intellectual property regimes. Originally, intellectual property laws assured individual authors, inventors, and creative types they would receive adequate return on their efforts thus stimulating further creative activity. However, intellectual property laws have shifted. The ownership of intellectual property rights rarely resides with an individual author or inventor anymore. Rather large corporations control intellectual property and determine its use. Peter Drahos and John Braithwaite summarize this situation nicely in their book, *Information Feudalism: Who Owns the Knowledge Economy?* In discussing corporate attempts to legitimize intellectual property claims, the authors state:

Attempts by corporate owners to give legitimacy to their intellectual property empires through appeals to romantic notions of individual authorship and inventorship looks less and less morally persuasive in a world where intellectual property rights, and TRIPS [Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights] especially, are being linked to bigger themes and issues—widening income inequalities such as those between developed and developing countries, excessive profits, the power and influence of big business on government, the loss of

national sovereignty, globalization, biodiversity (the last three all linked to patenting of plants, seeds, and genes), sustainable development, the self-determination of indigenous people, access to health services and the rights of citizens to cultural goods. (p.16)

What Drahos and Braithwaite rightly understand is that all property laws entrench inequalities. The intellectual property laws of the global capitalist order entrench gross inequalities. These laws also force a logic of their own upon information markets.

Marketing and News

THE NEVER-ENDING STORIES of car crashes and personal tragedy we read or view on the news make sense in this context. It is relatively cheap to send a news crew to an accident, robbery or murder site and ask a victim or neighbors their opinion of the situation. It takes a lot more time, effort, and money to investigate the structural problems of corporate or political governance, or the multiple causes of environmental degradation and its direct impact on public health. There is also greater risk of being sued or harassed by powerful interests if you do this type of reporting. Consistently covering what is happening in neighborhoods, schools, colleges, workplaces, and local and state political organizations also takes a lot of time and resources. There is plenty of news to be found in these places, but it is not the type of news that benefits the interests of media owners and other powerful groups. This situation is key to understanding why so much news and information appears to be disconnected from what people actually need as citizens.

It also helps explain why the vast majority of “experts” used by the news media come from government, corporate public relations firms, and well-funded think tanks. These sources of expertise have become adept at producing sound bytes and “news stories” that fit perfectly into television and radio news holes. By primarily using government, corporate, and “acceptable experts” as news sources, the media shape the world using a certain framework: the people whom journalists interview, quote, and give credence to, shape the news. The media work within specific and identifiable frameworks, and these frames shape what is and is not considered “news.” The problem for our democracy is that what the corporate media consider to be “news” is not necessarily what people need to know to be literate citizens.

What is happening to news media is affecting the rest of the information industry as well. Most of what people read in magazines, books, and on the Internet comes from the same or similar media corporations. The types of books and magazines that get published are more and more determined by the potential for profit rather than their literary and informational quality. The problem is that what sells is not what we need for informed citizenship.

There are those who argue that the Internet will drastically change this landscape. While the Internet could and does offer many alternatives to the corporately dominated news and information landscape, people must be aware that such alternatives exist, and they must know how to search for and locate these alternative sources.

While a rich variety of alternative perspectives are available on the Internet and in library databases, most people have never heard of the ideas presented by these sources, so they have no way of searching for them. There has always been a rich and vibrant “alternative press” in America and the world. However, because the organizations that produce this literature work at the margins or outside the confines of the dominant economic and political systems, they do not have the resources to advertise their material. Even if they had the resources to advertise, where would they advertise? Because many of these groups advocate ideas outside the governing paradigms, the very media corporations who would need to run their ads see them as a threat.

So, what are we to do? On the individual level every person involved in an organization should advocate for putting media reform, or revolution, on their organization’s agenda. If people are to know about the diversity of ideas and knowledge available in society, groups and organizations must pressure the corporate media to change. This advocacy for change can be done by direct pressure on the media and by making media reform an issue in local, state and national elections. There are many groups currently working on the structural reform of the media, and they need help from other individuals, groups and organizations.

Educational institutions can play a big role in developing information and media literate citizens. New curriculum needs to be designed to engage students’ critical thinking and creative abilities. Students need to understand what it means to be a self-governing citizen; they need to believe

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Religion in America:
Two Views

Editors' note: One of the vexing issues in the United States today is whether and how much revealed religion should influence our schools, our government, and our work places.

This concern is obviously far beyond the ability of this journal or any other to solve in two articles. Nonetheless, the editors thought it would be worthwhile to invite two persons who have had considerable exposure to religion in their lives to reflect on some of the questions facing all of us.

Jerry Stein says that our American civil religion unites us as Americans and is the belief to which in the end we all give credence. Robert Brusick, (who in the interest of full disclosure is related to one of the editors of this journal), suggests that religion as it is variously practiced in the United States is in fact a pastiche of many diverse beliefs—one of them being the tradition of the Enlightenment. The editors are grateful to both of these writers for being willing to write about this provocative and sensitive subject.

that they have the ability to shape their lives and their communities. Empowering students to become engaged, active, and thoughtful citizens is the major goal of public education in a democracy.

If our democracy is to survive, those working in education and civil society must make it their mission to advance critical media and information literacy. The citizenry of the 21st century must become conscious of the media and information landscape in which they live, and they must be convinced that it is important for them to care about the institutions that control the information and knowledge they receive. Literacy is no longer a matter of knowing how to read, write, and communicate. It requires knowing how information and media institutions operate and the important role every individual plays in shaping the political and cultural world we together create.

Tom Eland

Negotiating the Currents: Reflections
on the Role of Religion in Contemporary America

AS A DETERRENT TO PRE-ADOLESCENT drives, I now believe, my mother encouraged me to attend regular Bible Club sessions in the basement of Mrs. Haeffler's house in Passaic, New Jersey. While the technology of the day was low end flannel graph, the teacher had rock-solid confidence in the literal truth of the stories from Scripture. It might be said that her motto was "God said it, I believe it, that settles it.,,"

Somewhat later, as a more advanced adolescent, I attended a liberal arts college in New England where, as a religion-philosophy major, that basement world was upended. Reasoned instruction there debunked my former convictions. It was demonstrated how naive I was to believe in the veracity of those biblio-flannel stories. They were not only to be demythologized, they were to be relegated to the attic of irrelevance, outdated artifacts of an discredited mindset. According to this trope, we had grown up and come of age. If there was a motto for this dawning awareness it echoed a vastly different view of religion: "The fatherhood of God, the brotherhood of man, and the neighborhood of Boston."

From the heady days of the Enlightenment (that is, from about the mid-18th century) until the latter part of the 20th century, my education now affirmed, reason and rationality were the drivers of human endeavor; and they confidently assumed the withering—and quite likely the demise—of religion. Enlightenment thinkers old and new, I learned, held to the vision of the universe as orderly and harmonious. Things were governed by laws that supplanted the superstitions of religion and its befuddled, even oppressive, institutions. In many quarters Newtonian physics, rationalism, and deism replaced biblical and ecclesiastical authority, blind belief, and revealed religion. In other words, it was good bye, Mrs Haeffler; hello, smart new world.

To confirm this trajectory, I learned that in the 19th century the new world view was reinforced by the flowering of Darwinism. This dynamic further called into question the tenets of religion. The rising wave of thought claimed to dispel the kind of entrenched myth and error which for so long deluded the mass of humanity and halted the march of social progress. The following century, with two cataclysmic world wars, economic upheavals, rapid technological advances, and the twin lures of secularism and commercialism further fastened the lid, it

was thought, on the coffin of religion. Many at mid-century were gleefully prepared to conduct the funeral, for it was widely broadcast that “God is dead.”

The Corpse Resuscitates

AT ABOUT THE SAME TIME, however, something else began to happen. In many quarters, ones outside and often dismissed by the enlightened academy, the current began to shift. In North America and elsewhere throughout the world there seemed to be a resuscitation of the corpse. The stilled, small voice of Mrs. Haeffler began to be heard by increasing numbers, for religion began to experience a discernible (and for many post Enlightenment thinkers a baffling) rebirth here, there, and everywhere.

Some trace this renewal to the hectic decades of the 1960s and 1970s when religious leaders like Martin Luther King, Jr. and Daniel Berrigan blew the trumpet for civil rights and against the war in Vietnam. Soon after, however, the wind decidedly shifted and began to blow from right field with conservatives and evangelicals staking out vast territory in the various culture wars of the last several decades. Hot button issues like abortion, gay rights, prayer in school, creationism, the placement of the 10 Commandments and manger scenes in public places, and even ecological issues have occupied the public square and invested it with intense religious fervor.

Articles on prominent Evangelical figures have appeared with increasingly regularity in the media. In March, 2005, the *New York Times Magazine* ran a lengthy essay on “The Soul of the New Exurb,” detailing the vision of the new megachurch and how it is transforming America culture. Two weeks later, an interview with Richard Cizik, the leader of the country’s largest evangelical group talked about evangelical environmentalism. Along the way, Cizik affirmed his belief “that there will be a Second Coming of Jesus Christ, and the believers in Christ will rise to meet him in the air. The dead first, and then those who are still living.” This impressive reportage, something less likely for the *Times* of a decade or two earlier, is a sign of how things are changing. More to the point, such confident affirmation surely reflects the kind of conviction that underlies the all time best selling *Left Behind* series of books.

Two high profile deaths in the spring of 2005 serve to underscore the far-reaching and multivalent role religion has been playing in recent times. The protracted vigil in the last days of Terri Schiavo brought conservatives to raise a number of religious issues, specifically those relating to right to life. The death of John Paul II soon after saw an impressive outpouring of piety and fervor. Among those issues the new pope will have to face, observers have

noted, would be the force of traditional (i.e., conservative) values, the role of burgeoning churches in South America and Africa, and the challenge of Islam as an emerging worldwide phenomenon.

As one who is both an alumnus of Bible Club and an eagle scout of the Enlightenment I have often wondered what to make of all this. Is Mrs. Haeffler hopelessly out of date, replaced by the iPod world? Or, is the Enlightenment defunct, displaced by the ineluctable resurrection of religion? How does one carry on a conversation with integrity when one has friends and family members who are members of both camps? What do we think and do when we are equally attracted and repelled by convictions that challenge our own? Does one just skip over the issue-laden front page of the newspaper and opt for the sports and comics sections? That won’t do, of course, for similar issues dog those parts of the newspaper as well.

In an article written soon after the most recent presidential election (*New York Times*, November 4, 2004) Gary Wills was obliged to raise these kinds of questions. He was prompted to make this response: “...surveys have shown that many more Americans believe in the Virgin Birth than in Darwin’s theory of evolution...Which raises the question: Can a people that believes more fervently in the Virgin Birth than in evolution still be called an Enlightened nation? The moral zealots will, I predict, give some cause for dismay even to nonfundamentalists...It is not too early to start yearning back toward the Enlightenment.”

Life is Pastiche

THIS RESPONSE SUGGESTS to me something I once heard in a history of art class at the Minneapolis Institute of Arts. When faced with the conflicting complexity of modern art, the lecturer observed that life is pastiche. Modern life is so filled with contradictions, he observed, that we need to stitch our thought world together from many different kinds of cloth. One can love the Dali Lama and still go to Sunday School. That is the nature of pastiche. If that is so, one can be puzzled, disturbed, even maddened by contemporary trends in religion; yet one can be nothing less than fascinated by it all.

At the same time, one can and must be convinced that reason and order need to be affirmed and defended. Still, one cannot escape the nagging suspicion that there are certain limits and follies to the Enlightenment view as well. Belief and thought, reason and action, doubt and affirmation, the confidence of Mrs. Haeffler on the one hand and assurances of the Enlightenment on the other are all part of the complex melody of life which we all must

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try to sing. The undeniable influence of religion provides a dangerous dissonance for some; but it offers a satisfying harmony for others. And all the time reason and good will desperately try to find their voice in the mix. Confused, and not altogether sure which part to sing, I find myself alternately fascinated and irritated; but I always find it challenging—and often satisfying—to be a part of the chorus.

Robert Brusic

Robert Brusic has recently retired as the pastor of Luther Seminary in St. Paul.

The Sacred in America

An American Bible

AND GOD SAID: ALL MEN ARE created equal, that they are endowed by their creator with No, sorry. God said: Let there be light. The universe and the Bible begin with light. It is our American creation that begins with the dream of equality.

We follow our “creation document,” the Declaration of Independence, with our “law,” the Constitution and its first ten amendments. This parallel with key creation and law documents in religion suggests that Americans have a holy mission, or at least a sacred vision, embodied in our creed. Some people just can’t distinguish it from the biblical one. But what we believe as Americans *is* a different creed for which we give up our lives and that inspires us—sometimes—to make this a better place to live. Those who don’t believe it is different need to check out our democratic version of the Sermon on the Mount—the Gettysburg address. It is the last line that makes our hearts beat faster: “that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.” It gets me every time.

Our Prophets

THE SACRED AMERICAN DEMOCRATIC mission also has its own prophets. Listen to Jefferson from the *Notes on Virginia*, 1782: “It does me no injury for my neighbor to say there are twenty gods or no God. It neither picks my pocket nor breaks my leg”. Twenty gods? No God? This does not sound like the Christian nation many claim we have always had. Here Jefferson again, from his autobiography, describing the adoption of the Virginia Act for Religious Freedom in 1786. Jefferson explained that the preamble had been submitted with a phrase indicating that coercion of the free mind “...is a departure from the plan of the Holy Author of our religion.” An amendment was proposed to add the name “Jesus Christ” so it would read that coercion of the

free mind was “...a departure from the plan of Jesus Christ, the holy author of our religion.” As Jefferson explained: “The insertion was rejected by a great majority, in proof that they meant to comprehend within the mantle of its protection the Jew and the Gentile, the Christian and the Mahometan, the Hindoo and the infidel of every denomination.” Jews, Mahometans Hindoos and infidels? Isn’t it surprising to see such a wide religious welcome extended over 200 years ago?

Now let’s turn to Lincoln: “When any church will inscribe over its altars, as its sole qualification for membership, the Savior’s condensed statement for the substance of both law and gospel, ‘Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might, and thy neighbor as thyself’, that church will I join with all my heart and soul.”

These references by our prophets to “Holy Authors” and Saviors, Creators and free minds, and equalities and due processes argue that from our inception we have balanced a deep commitment to the tense soul of democracy — freedom *and* equality—with sacred beliefs,, transcendent references and biblical cadences. Robert Bellah has called this our “biblical and republican” tradition. At the heart of this tradition, from the beginning, has been a deep intentional freedom to stand apart. Max Lerner called this our “dissenting and pluralist tradition in religion.” It is upon this American “theology” that we have built our society. It has been called our “civil religion.” This term is too tame, for it is this “religion” that defines what Americans all share. It defines what our forefathers died for, what many devote their lives to today, and thus what truly is the sacred in America.

The Creed Grows

THE DEAL WE CUT BACK in the 1700s looks something like this: God is in the creed, but we accept no doctrine, church or religious authority. In return we create a new form of society on earth, a democracy of liberty and equality for all. Lastly, all are free to dissent. That is the shared American pact, the American sacred, our “religion” if you will.

We (the people) have become confused about this arrangement and fail to understand the religious nature of our national pact for at least three reasons: First, because we are armed with the unalienable right to liberty, individuals seek and find sacredness *not* by participating in the national “religion” but elsewhere: in traditional religion, in nature, in family, in self-reliance, in art, etc. Of course, this is exactly what the founder-prophets intended: that individuals would find happiness in ways individuals chose. Furthermore, there is no sense in our American creed that individual

sacredness is less important. After all, to help individual Americans freely live their lives is a fundamental part of the justification and purpose of the democratic creed.

Secondly, some simply deny the holiness of the American creed. They are confused or bewildered because as with all religions, the practice often does not live up to the creed. Other deals were cut at the same time with slave owners, property owners, and landowners, and thus some have felt free to deny that there is sacredness at the American core.

Thirdly, the creed changes and thus people fight over how it should change. That is, the creed in America is not static. The creed is open to change by absorbing back into it some of the experiences of the American people. How does this work? What gets in? There are no firm rules. It is much more mysterious than amending the Constitution, but in essence certain private experiences and struggles of the American people over the years become so overwhelming that they achieve creedal status. They become part of the great story we tell about America that is the publicly shared American sacred awareness. For example, when black Americans enslaved for generations finally achieved acceptance *at the creedal level*, then their story became part of our nation's sacred story. Thus we all now say with Dr. King, "I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed:... I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character..."

And, when forty million immigrants arrived at our shores between 1880 and 1920, transforming themselves and the country forever, the pain, hope and struggle of that experience became part of the shared creed. The new parts of the creed must be true to the creed but also reveal elements of it in new ways: "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, The wretched refuse of your teeming shore. Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed to me, I lift my lamp beside the golden door!" Liberty and equality are present in this text but are extended now in a new formulation opening the door more widely to the world. The private experience of the immigrant has become part of the shared definition of all Americans.

Additions to the creed are not always to the better. Standing in front of the great creedal monument at Mt. Rushmore in the Black Hills, one would find it difficult not to muse on how almost right, but how totally wrong it is. Almost right? Well, it *was* placed in the Black Hills—someone knew a sacred place when they saw it. And of the four faces on the statue, Washington, Jefferson, and Lincoln are three creedal

guys if there ever were. Totally wrong? It just happens that place was already sacred to some other people whom we subjected violently. The only proper creedal use of the Black Hills would be to honor native American life and wisdom, not to locate four hugely carved white men who ask nothing of us.

When the system works, individuals are free to find their own sacredness or to deny the creed. Most importantly, they can struggle over the meaning of the creed, add to it, or redefine it to reflect their people's experiences. The resulting struggle is a struggle over our future, over the meaning of democracy, and over the meaning of the sacred in America. It is essentially a religious struggle. The fight—like all fights for control of the sacred —tends toward the ungodly.

A House Divided

FIGHTS OVER THE CREED SEEM TO BE increasingly vicious. At the moment extreme advocates of both the conservative and the liberal sides of the debate are acting like they would like to drum one of our "unalienable rights"—the pursuit of happiness—right out of the creed. Why? The left doesn't like it because it thinks that the clause really reads: the pursuit of stuff, goods, i.e. the dominance of capitalism. The right is equally angry. They think that the happiness clause reads: the pursuit of pleasure, sex, and other forms of hedonism.

Liberty is pushing against both ends. Nevertheless, both positions alert us to real dangers: the impact of the global economy and unmoored individualism on our traditional ways of being. Can our society really hold together under the onslaught and pace of change? Can the sacred creed rise to the challenge, evolve in ways that once again affirm liberty and equality but find new and deeper meanings within them? This is the true test of the American creed, the real American religion. The creed will grow or the house will fall in ways that may not please the combatants. As Washington was preparing to step aside, he felt compelled to warn in his farewell address not to "enfeeble the sacred ties which now link [us] together." After leading the fight for freedom, Washington worried that the people would backslide and inaugurate a new kind of sacred religion. But perhaps it was Lincoln who sharpened the focus when, in his second inaugural address, he observed that in our sacred battles both sides "read the same Bible, and pray to the same god." The prayers of both cannot always be answered; that of neither will be answered fully. Therein lies the complexity we face.

Jerry Stein

Jerry Stein is whoever he is

Writing on Reading: What might be learned from two books

LET US SAY THAT writing to communicate with others is a noble and worthy endeavor. Therefore, by extension, reading these communications is also noble and, at least, potentially worthy. What can be more laudatory than writing about reading and reading those writings?

As educated adults, we likely approach the act of reading with two mentalities that co-exist even though one may struggle for dominance over the other. Reading is a personal experience, for sure; reading is also for learning. Professionally, we extol reading for carrying cultural heritage and knowledge. Personally, we relish reading because it gives us more enjoyment, discovery and insight than we gain from experience alone.

Because of the jostling between the social and personal purposes of reading, I want to review two of several recent books that explore the reading phenomenon. A.J. Jacobs, a writer and editor at *Esquire*, took on ‘Operation Britannica’—to read the 2002 edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. As a fan of the mighty EB ever since a public librarian helped me use it when faced with a question on Genghis Khan, I wondered what the experience of reading the encyclopedia to gain knowledge was like. I taught reference services 21 times in my library career and always featured encyclopedias and the EB. I knew that EB, more than any other current encyclopedia, held to the idea that the Greeks had — the encyclopedia is the circle of knowledge.

In *The Know-It-All: one man’s humble quest to become the smartest person in the world* (2004), Jacobs sets forth his motivations. He seeks to recover an education lost to the past and restore a mind overrun with trivia from his years at *Entertainment Weekly*. Mostly, he wants to gain intelligence. When his Aunt Marti questions the assertion that the amount of knowledge does not make for mental ability, he begins his defense. Knowledge equips intelligence with more reserves, he argues; knowledge exposes options and makes for flexibility in thinking. It is likely that many of us have thought this way ourselves.

Most of Jacobs’s report is an alphabetical hopscotch through a chaos of articles, A-Z. From the start, he says (p. 11), “One of my biggest challenges is figuring out how to shoehorn my new found knowledge into conversations. Naturally, I want to show off.” Such a penchant for the

relatively meaningless is hard to shake. Jacobs meets Ron, who labors to understand philosophy (p. 244). “He asks me what I have learned in the encyclopedia. I figure I should give him a philosophy fact.” Jacobs tells Ron that Descartes had a fixation for cross-eyed women.

I found only three selections that displayed any satisfactory depth, the articles *encyclopedias*, *intelligentsia*, and *thinking*. More puzzling to me is how Jacobs could have read the 2002 edition, 44 million words, written it up and been published in 2004. He says little about his method except that he tried to read at every opportunity, complicated by the weight of lugging heavy volumes around. He investigated speed-reading but gave up on it as a sham. He reports that by the first 30 hours of reading he had reached “Amethyst.” This is equivalent to roughly 45-50,000 words an hour.

In the second book on reading, Sara Nelson, a writer and editor at *Glamour*, planned a ‘Reading Year Project,’ whereby she would read a book a week. She considered all those books she had meant to read for a long time as well as those that reviews, friends, and bookstore displays brought to her attention. She set out to do what all conscientious readers seek to do — follow their lists and piles of unread books.

In *So Many Books, So Little Time: a year of passionate reading* (2003), Nelson confesses her addiction to reading. She credits her father for teaching her to read, her mother for setting a reading example, and her studious and critical sister, Liza, for bringing hundreds of books to her attention that she otherwise would have missed. Nelson’s world is made up of books, reading, and relations to writers, other readers, the publishing field, as well as to non-readers (especially her husband), and to emerging readers like her young son, Charlie. Because Nelson is a professional reviewer and regards her book-a-week plan as time away from work, she takes a personal approach to each book. Consequently, these are not reviews in the traditional sense, but instead fifty wonderfully contextual and delightfully crafted personal essays about reading as a lived experience.

While Jacobs had amazing powers of dedication to plan, Nelson showed little consistency in sticking to her own proposal. She read routinely, but not always as intended. Often the book she planned to read in any given week did not fit the setting, mood, or competing interests of where she found herself at the moment. Family and friends pressed other books on her; past books once read suggested others found to be more alluring. She chose to read in tandem

with her son when he needed encouragement so they could discuss what they each read by themselves. Eight-year-old Charlie remarked about *Charlotte's Web*, "I don't like it, Mom. It's about a girl and a pig. Why should I care?" But they persevered. Charlie read it and liked it, because he saw it was a book about himself and others that he knows. Such is the motivation of most readers.

Nelson has wonderfully wise and astute things to say about the timeliness of reading, about gaining perspective and agility over time, about why Dickens or Wharton or Philip Roth or just about anyone else (she explains why Truman Capote is different) write all their books in the same vein. It's their "sensibility," the way they see the world and express that vision. Nelson makes clear that there is little reason to force yourself to read what others think you should read and you, however much you respect them, can hardly bear.

Nevertheless, two things happened for me in my reading of Nelson. I came to see how she reacted to books and why, and I could scale her reactions through my own filter, and decide where we connected. So when she said *The Bridges of Madison County* and *Tuesday at Morrie's* were over-hyped and underachieving, I was glad that I had not bothered with them. I did not go for all her enthusiasms, but she definitely whetted my appetite. I wrote down ten books that I had been out of sync with and will at least investigate. I missed Norah Ephron's *Heartburn* many years ago, but what she had to say about it made me so curious, I have been on the lookout for it ever since.

By the same token, nothing Jacobs wrote made me want to dive into the EB any more than I feel I already need or want to do. At the end, Jacobs considers summing up his experience in one sentence and finds he cannot. But he does write a long paragraph in conclusion, a mix of wise realization and more trivia. "I know that everything is connected like a worldwide version of the six-degrees-of-separation game. I know that history is simultaneously a bloody mess and a collection of feats so inspiring and amazing they make you proud to share the same DNA structure with the rest of humanity... I know that opossums have thirteen nipples. I know I've contradicted myself a hundred times over the last year, and that history has contradicted itself thousands of times." And finally, "I know that knowledge and intelligence are not the same thing – but they do live in the same neighborhood. I know once again, firsthand, the joy of learning."

Two Books concludes on page 12

Book Review

Chicago and Illinois: A Guide to Sacred Sites and Peaceful Places, by Marilyn Chiat. Hidden Spring (an imprint of Paulist Press): Mahwah, NJ, 2004. \$22

PEOPLE TRAVEL FOR MANY reasons—business, visiting family and friends, relaxation, or education. Chicago and Illinois don't seem very exotic, especially compared to Canterbury, England or Calcutta, India that are on my list of must-see places! But since reading Marilyn Chiat's book: *Chicago and Illinois: A Guide to Sacred Sites and Peaceful Places*, I've been itching to pack up my car and set out! The sacred sites and peaceful places featured in this book are inviting.

Chiat, in her early writing, focussed on religious architecture. Gradually, she broadened her definition of sacred sites to include buildings with historical connections, and natural landscapes. Her selection of places that meet her criteria for sacred space results in a mass of intriguing sites, surely more than any modern day vacationer can explore.

Even better, she gives us a thoroughly readable context in which to place these sacred sites by setting the stage with a history of Illinois' and Chicago's spiritual life. Chiat describes the rich wilderness where native peoples lived for thousands of years, hunting and cultivating. Then came 17th-century French explorers, who coveted the wealth of fur-producing wildlife. Next came pioneers from the East settled—subsequently destroying and obliterating much of the native culture. All they could see was the fertile soil that would produce bountiful crops. Chiat interweaves the region's social and religious history, including the development of, and contributions from an amazingly inclusive group of Eastern and Western religious communities.

Before the author treats her readers to explicit vignettes of featured sights—the last three-quarters of the book—she gently offers an eye-opening lesson about ways to view and experience space and edifices, perhaps akin to pilgrims' experiences on their journeys. Chiat helps us understand the importance of the location and position of churches, mosques, and synagogues based on their long-standing religious traditions. Other times the location of a house of worship tells the story of patterns of immigrant settlement.

Because of her expertise in religious architecture, Chiat treats the reader to extensive information about architectural elements, styles, and plans for buildings for worship. In highlighted sections, she explains the importance of decorative components like

Chicago and Illinois concludes on page 12

Afterword 1

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MACAE is a professional association that provides social and intellectual vitality to its members who are involved in adult education. We have an annual conference, a newsletter, membership directory, and Issue Forms. Our members work in community, continuing, secondary and higher education; libraries; ESL; diploma programs; nonprofit agencies; business enterprises; and others. Our members are administrators, instructors, facilitators, counselors, writers, and librarians.

Practical Thinking welcomes submissions from members and non-members. We are especially interested in topical issues, but will also welcome essays, reviews, and memories. Generally articles should not be longer than 1800 words. Please submit articles electronically, as Word or RTF files. Use as little formatting as possible. All submissions will be acknowledged, although the editors reserve the right to decline to publish an article.

The editors have the right to make minor adjustments in the manuscript. *PT* assumes no responsibility for contributors' errors. Opinions expressed by contributors may or may not reflect the opinions of the editors.

Deadline for the next issue is November 1 and for the issue after that, May 1, 2006.

Contributors to this issue:
Robert Brusica, Tom Eland,
Katherine Frank, Jerry Stein,
Roger Sween

Practical Thinking As A Spiritual Discipline

PERHAPS IT IS TOO EASY FOR ME to reflect on the purpose of this new publication using this lead in on spirituality. After all, I spend my professional life working with religious organizations. But I want to build a bridge between the notion of spiritual discipline and what ultimately is a critical aspect of life in a democratic society.

In classical terms, a spiritual discipline is a practice one uses to keep focused on matters of central concern. Across world religious traditions, some form of meditation, for example, plays a fundamental role in breaking through the bonds of routine to new insight or a new way of being in the world. Spiritual masters across time have urged their disciples to turn away from the cacophony of life to moments in which the mind is stilled and lessons of life buried deep inside began their instruction of one's heart.

Thinking is not meditating if we try to make a one-to-one exchange. I would, however, like to make a case for *practical thinking* as a meditation-like habit from which even the most secular of us could benefit. Indeed, I want to argue that for those of us for whom issues of adult learning and development are a field of professional inquiry and practice, this sort of thinking takes on a new degree of urgency.

Practical thinking is part of the process of making meaning we associate with adulthood. The practical thinker pays attention to what is happening and spends time identifying how events, ideas, actions, failures, biases, ideals, political necessity, religious values, social issues, and moral dilemmas come together to enable us to interpret what it means to live in this society at this time. Practical thinking builds on action, but it also draws deeply on theory – on the work of other women and men who consider what lies behind experience and who offer explanations that attempt to make sense of what is occurring in their workplaces, in their neighborhoods, in the Twin Cities or Midwest, in the nation, and in sites around the world.

Tom Eland's essay on a literate citizenry is an excellent example of practical thinking. Tom devours all forms of media and media criticism. He is an expert on the alternative sources of news and information. What he has written is good, solid practical thinking offered to other practical thinkers as they puzzle through the complex, intricate network shaping contemporary life.

With the Minnesota Independent Scholars Forum, the Minnesota Adult and Continuing Education Association (MACAE) launches this occasionally journal as yet another source of information. It encourages contributors who think practically about ideas and concerns important to them to write them down so that the richness of that reflection becomes a resource to others. Spiritual disciplines flourished as people used and adapted various practices related to the quest for deeper meaning. That is what *Practical Thinking* in its own way seeks to accomplish.

Victor Klimoski <VKlimoski@CSBSJU.EDU>

The Reason for Practical Thinking

RECENTLY I WAS ON A TOUR in Greece. While we were on the Acropolis, our guide pointed out the Agora (the market place) and then the Pnyx (the voting place) and told how the Athenian men (the only people allowed to vote) had to be obliged to go to vote on the various issues of the day. It seems that when it was time for a ballot, several soldiers with red-dyed ropes gathered—"corralled" really—the men from the Agora to the voting place; anyone with a red stain on their robes would be stiffly fined for attempting to shirk their duty as a citizen. I like this story not only because it shows the humanity of the ancient Greeks, who would rather argue or talk or maybe even shop than vote, but also because it seems to me to be a good example of practical thinking. The Athenian authorities knew that for democracy to work they had to get everyone onto the Pnyx to vote and the only way to do it was to make voting obligatory in a pretty obvious way.

Although we have cast our democracy somewhat differently (we encourage and even beg people to vote; we don't fine them for not voting), we nonetheless have taken some ideals from the model of ancient Greece. One of them is that we should have an informed populace—who think about and know what they are doing. It is in this light that I see *Practical Thinking* as a contribution to the literary scene in Minnesota. This first issue is an opportunity for scholars and teachers (MISF and MACAE) to be thoughtfully informed on practical issues such as the future of books (Sween), the place of religion in public life (Brusic and Stein), and the new shape of knowledge (Eland).

But *Practical Thinking* is not just for readers; it is also for writers. I believe that writing is an important way of finding out what we know and think. I strongly believe that the more people we have writing the more people we will have reading—and perhaps thinking.

We would like to publish articles from many different authors on many different subjects. We will consciously seek out writers on subjects that interest us and that we hope will interest you, but we cannot know or guess everything. If you have something to say, please contact one of us for editorial guidelines; or if you have a piece that you think might be of interest, send it along and we'll work with you to get it into print.

In addition, we will be happy to review any book by a MACAE or MISF author. Please send us a copy of your book or let us know where we can obtain a copy for review.

We are also interested in feedback from our readers. If you would like to respond to any article in a letter to the editor, please do so. We will not publish anonymous letters, but we will publish e-mail correspondence. The deadline for the next issue is November 1.

Lucy Brusic <lucy@brusic.net>

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MISF fosters scholarly discussions; supports the research, writing, and publication of independent scholars; and educates the public about the role and value of independent scholars and scholarship. It also functions as fiscal agent for those who have received grants from other institutions.

Although interests range from the fine arts to physics, all members share an interest in intellectual inquiry.

Founded in 1982, MISF is a Minnesota nonprofit corporation with federal 501(c)(3) status.

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Two Books...concluded from page 9

And I've learned that it's harder to learn from someone you constantly question, than from someone you sincerely appreciate. And shared experience, even through reading, is more salable than keen reporting.

Mostly, I am confirmed that reading is a good thing, especially so because it is not all one thing.

Roger Sween

Roger Sween, who quit full-time employment in 2000 to devote himself to reading and writing, is finding it increasingly impossible to get through all the good books, but figures he is up to the 12th century.

Chicago and Illinois....concluded from page 9

stained glass and pipe organs that enhance the experience of building occupants.

The rest of the book is devoted to sights-to-see, first in Chicago, and then in the rest of the state, divided into five regions. My only complaint about this guide is the absence of decent maps for the areas written about. The two existing maps contain virtually no useful information. Regardless, I'm ready for my Illinois adventure! If Chiat's book is any hint of forthcoming guides in this series, I can't wait for "Minneapolis/St. Paul and Minnesota" to appear!

Katherine Simon Frank

The author, who claims the Bay Area (California) as her "spirit home," and who recently retired to research and write about social movements and social change, naturally drifts—as she travels—towards churches, cemeteries, historical sites, and sacred landscapes, particularly near oceans!

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