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The View from an Elder: Closing Essay

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My first encounter with shape-shifting, the ability to transform into something else, was in a novel full of evocative images of a boy who turned into a bird. It was an enchanting idea that never really left me and it stayed close to my heart just waiting to surface and delight me again and again. You too may have read and loved T.H. White's *The Once and Future King,* the chronicles of Wart, the boy who would become King Arthur. The young royal's schooling in leadership consists of a series of transformations into different animals, experiences that together teach him how to be a good king. For example, when he enters the world of birds in a lesson about social perception, there is no need for Wart to imagine, mimic or even study flight. Rather, his teacher-owl Archimedes transforms him into a real live, swooping, thermal gliding, feathered bird:

> "Now, we had better fly," said the owl. "Just flip to the window-sill here, to get accustomed to yourself before we take off." Wart jumped for the sill and automatically gave himself an extra kick with his wings, just as a high jumper swings his arms. He landed on the sill with a thump, as owls are apt to do, did not stop himself in time, and toppled straight out of the window. "This," he thought to himself, cheerfully, "is where I break my neck." It was curious, but he was not taking life seriously. He felt the castle walls streaking past him, and the ground and the moat swimming up. He kicked with his wings, and the ground sank again, like water in a leaking well. In a second that kick of his wings had lost its effect, and ground was welling up. He kicked again. It was strange, going forward with the earth ebbing and flowing beneath him, in the utter silence of down-fringed feathers."[1]

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Oh, how I wished to soar like Wart did, to be what he had become but only for a little while. I'd miss my family too much. As suddenly as old Archimedes whisked me skyward, he'd magically return me to my human flock. I'd be much wiser but unscathed just like the boy-king, Arthur.

Recently, I have again been contemplating how Wart's shape-shifting gave him the experiences and wisdom he needed to transform from a boy into a king. And beyond the joyful remembering of young Wart's flying escapades in a novel read long ago (well before grandmotherhood arrived), I found a deeper realization about shape-shifting. I discovered that Wart's development was a metaphor for my own professional and personal transformation as a librarian. For me, the shape shift has been an attitude shift—a mental reshaping if you will—of a librarian come lately to the field.

Armed with an M.A. in American Studies and some past clerical experience at a local branch of a large public system, I entered library school in mid-life during the mid-1980s. It was well before the Google launch in 1998 but change was a-coming. There were Wart-like "This is where I break my neck" moments in graduate school, while interning at a law library and beginning my career. Many of them were related to a personal state of angst over engagement with new technology. Alas, no beaky rescuer fluttered near my window sill when I jumped into the unknown.

My reservations about technology were twofold. First, the historian in me worried over the lost ability to recover the past. At times I envisioned a huge midden of software installation disks, stored data disks, manuals, and antiquated machines rising outside my library office window high enough to obscure the sky. Would future anthropologists bother to excavate these refuse heaps? Electronic love letters of the famous, incriminating government memos, brilliant poetic ruminations or life saving formulaic breakthroughs might lie therein, forever entombed in carcinogenic packaging. Who will save and then translate these records trapped inside obsolete technology?

In my estimation, the old fashioned way to unearth the past is immediately gratifying and preferable. The "finder generations" require no intervening technology to make exhumed item/s comprehensible. Instead, they frequently revel in an intense, magical encounter with the past; possess intelligence enough to recognize historic value; and muster enough generosity or greed to share stumbled upon manuscripts or artifacts with the caretakers of our collective memory (that's us, fellow librarians, archivists and historians). I offer two examples. The Lewis and Clark expedition recently had its bicentennial and there were indeed compelling reasons to revisit their famous journey, among them the accidental discovery of new information to analyze. New finds included some of William Clark's never-before-seen "rough field notes" (found in a Minnesota attic in the 1950s) and more original maps.[2]

What about less stellar, everyday people in our country's narrative? During the 1980s an unnamed renovator rescued a cache of letters written by a Confederate

soldier who was with Lee when he surrendered at Appomattox in 1865! They were mysteriously "crammed behind some old wallboards" of a crumbling Virginia farmhouse.[3] The Georgia recruit's heartfelt words inspired an historical novel. Recovering the past accidentally, by using low tech tools of the past--hammers, crowbars or shovels, may continue to the end of time. I have less confidence that high tech tools, with their built in obsolescence, will so easily and democratically reveal the past.

The second, more mundane concern rests with the merits of spending valuable time learning throwaway or disposable knowledge, especially when it is acquired at a plodding pace. Apparently, this was fairly common in my demographic. In fact a gender/age matrix for it came under scrutiny by government and corporate entities. Studies generated by them coined new terms like "technostress" and "cyberphobia" in articles that reported their findings. For example, a December 1987 issue of *Government Finance Review* produced a survey report entitled, "Gender and Age in Technostress: Effects on White Collar Productivity" that documented computer anxiety among females especially, and for those educated prior to the 1970s.[4] Favorite coping mechanisms for me and many others included complaining and eating (popcorn, Twinkies and chocolates), punctuated by rare spurts of office cleaning and intermittent fulminating.[5]

It is at this discomfiture level that I became a dabbler in shamanism. It is hard to establish the exact moment when my shape-shifting occurred. In an act of humility, I became unafraid to show stupidity; I became more childlike and teachable again. My fretting and crankiness stopped when I asked for help. It was the most logical, sensible, mature yet untried solution for a stubborn senior. Who became my Archimedes? A parliament of owlets, actually--young, computer savvy librarians and library systems folk rescued me. All of them were typically fast track graspers of the new, enamored of high "techieness" yet infused with a sense of humor, playful, prankish and above all, patient. What benevolent wizards they've been wherever I land, eagerly sharing their rapidly acquired then discarded then newly gained expertise again and again. I became less harried and heeded Merlin's farewell advice to Wart:

> "Learn why the world wags and what wags it. That is the only thing which the mind can never exhaust, never alienate, never be tortured by, never fear or distrust, and never dream of regretting. Learning is the thing for you."[6]

My transformation may be placed in a larger, more important context and continuum. It is worth recalling the part of our professional training that examines the historical rationale for knowledge expansion and the delivery systems that facilitate dissemination of it through time. Presently, it's morphed into a knowledge explosion necessitating a massive organizing effort combined with transport to interested and economically privileged parties at an accelerated pace. Swift, relentless change causes the discomfiture of many involved in the process and

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disquiet in those marooned on the wrong side of the digital divide. What happened and is happening is most ably summarized by a Merlin-like figure, Frederick G. Kilgour. This librarian-educator revolutionized our profession by developing OCLC (Online Computer Library Center) and the database called WorldCat that used computer networks to share library resources worldwide.[7] He tells us that:

> "Over the last five thousand years there have been four transformations of the "book" in which each manifestation has differed from its predecessors in shape and structure. The successive, sometimes overlapping, forms were the clay tablet inscribed with a stylus (2500 B.C.-A.D. 100), the papyrus roll written on with brush or pen (2000B.C.-A.D. 700), the codex, originally inscribed with pen (A.D. 100) and the electronic book, currently in the process of innovation. There have also been three major transformations in method and power application in reproducing the codex: machine printing from cast type, powered by human muscle (1455-1814); nonhuman power driving both presses and typecasting machines (1814-1970); and computer driven photocomposition combined with offset printing (1970--)."[8]

He also observed that the staying power for clay tablets and papyrus rolls was a mere 2500 years. The codex survived for 2000 years. For this true blue bibliophile, even the physicality of a codex/book can be a source of pleasure. Until the e-book offers more armchair appeal, I shall linger in the codex comfort zone, two millennia and counting as long as possible. The Kilgour summation offers a stunning example of the unstoppable, imperative, biological need for change that is already bypassing the book as we know it. The quoted paragraph above alludes to clichés about change that we invoke regularly such as its inevitability, the dizzying acceleration of it in our lifetimes, the futility of longing for a golden past that never really existed. But remember, it's the package that's changing not the message. The best books will forever contain the emotional power to stop time. Read the "Genesis" chapter in Wallace Stegner's Wolf Willow. You will be taken on the wildest cowboy ride imaginable across the plains of Saskatchewan in the early 1900s. Each of us can cite book titles that ensnared and transported us to another realm or state where we lived intensely in someone else's past, present or future.

The history of the book seems direct and pure. It exemplifies only positive aspects of advances in civilization and the preservation of those accomplishments for generations to come. Rather indisputable, we assume. Yet there is the dark side, always a dark side, to human endeavors even the most well meant ones. New technology becomes the engine or agent of change as envisioned by fallible human creators. There is a commonly held belief in progress as a societal good, unquestionably good and worthwhile to pursue. That solid claim seems to be unraveling. There are wise men rising up to challenge this infatuation. One of them is sociologist Lee Worth Bailey, who has written an intriguing work. He both chronicles and questions the human love affair with technologically driven progress. He issues several caveats:

"History shows that technological perfection is a utopian dream. Nevertheless, dreams continue, and they urgently need examination. Machines, no matter how sophisticated, are not autonomous objects that will obey their master's intentions. They can magnify the potential for harm. Instead of saying, "guns don't kill, people do," we should say, "with guns people can kill many more people, much more easily." **Powerful technologies amplify human power, for better and for worse**. We err dangerously when we neglect the human desires that are inherent parts of technological design and usage. When the dreams, expectations, fantasies, and passions that drive technological design and use are ignored, machines can cause massive, fatal damage. Industrial society's dreams of utopian technological accomplishments are fascinating. But there are mythic fantasies that need to see the light of critical consciousness. Or, like a crocodile lurking under a swamp, technology's enchantments will leap up and bite back."[9]

Acknowledging that those of us in the knowledge industry have a sense of history and enough honesty to admit that there are problems, serious ones, we proceed on to look at the new "something new." It's Google, again. This company is a powerful enough entity to name our age. We're now immersed in the merry, mercurial Age of Google. It may prove to be as transformative as The Age of Enlightenment or The Age of Discovery. Google, a powerful corporation residing on America's left coast, escaped the crash of California's second gold rush known as the "dot.com" boom. Freed of a fight for survival, the company forged ahead with energy, sagacity and inventiveness to land in Chapter Four of Kilgour's history of the book –the electronic-book revolution.

In fact, they have recently developed Google Book Search where one can locate and buy e-books and old fashioned tomes as well. The company is so hydra headed in its enterprises that satiric swipes are issued daily. Whatever these corporate rock stars are doing to please or plunder millions, the fan base somehow keeps expanding. In my case, Google offers a frontline librarian, teaching bibliographic instruction sessions to clueless, bewildered or bored college freshmen, a salvific point of common ground between the eager and not so eager young and the one elder standing briefly before them. When I mention Google to my classes, eyes light up, experiences are related, interest is generated. It becomes a way to segue to the carefully screened, frequently costly menu of electronic resources mounted on the library web page. For this magical gift of connection, fleeting though it is, I applaud sorcerers Brin and Page and their apprentices.

Notes

1 T.H. White, *The Once and Future King* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Berkley Medallion Edition, 1967) 161.

2 Gary E. Moulton, ed. *The Lewis and Clark journals: an American epic of discovery: the abridgement of the definitive Nebraska edition* Meriwether Lewis, William Clark, and members of the Corps of Discovery (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 2003) x.

3 E. Randall Floyd, *Deep in the Heart* (Augusta, Ga: Harbor House, 1998) 379.

4 Victoria B. Elder, Ella P. Gardner and Stephen R. Ruth, "Gender and Age in Technostress: Effects on White Collar Productivity," *Government Finance Review* Dec. 1987: 19-21.

5 Sonya S. Gaityher Shepherd, "Computer Skills, Technostress, and Gender in Higher Education," *Encyclopedia of Gender and Information Technology*, ed. Eileen M. Trauth (Hershey, PA: Idea Group Reference 2006) 126.

6 White 183.

7 "Frederick G. Kilgour, founder of OCLC, dies at 92," OCLC News Releases 1 Aug. 2006,22 Oct. 2006 <http://www.oclc.org/news/releases/200631.htm>

8 Frederick G. Kilgour, *The Evolution of the Book* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998) 3-4.

9 Lee Worth Bailey, *The Enchantments of Technology* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2005) 21-22.

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