Leaving the Books Behind

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Leaving the Books Behind

by Mary E. (Tinker) Massey (University of South Carolina, School of Library and Information Science, Columbia, SC) <MMassey@gwu.edu>

Dr. Felli Tu, my professor at USC in Research, recently told me about a book she felt I must read. The reference was to Sherry Turkle’s The Second Self: published in 1984 by Simon and Schuster. I was unsure why this particular recommendation had been made to me until I curled up with the book after the final class and papers were completed. This text examines the culture of and created by the advent of the computer. Dr. Turkle actually looks at how the computer has influenced our lives and changed our psyches forever.

Machines have always influenced our lives, giving us more leisure time to do things of pleasure or waste. I don’t remember ever reading a book about how people react to a “thinking” machine and how it enhances or changes the way you think, act and emote on a daily basis. She calls the computer a “catalyst of culture formation.” We are combining and recombin- ing into groups of intense interests. We seek answers to problems and seek new ways of dealing with information, people, and processes. It has been a rebirth of the sixties, an intense intellectual examination era. Our new horizons soar to thoughts of “knowledge cooperatives” instead of “food cooperatives.” We now think of computers as not only a means to an end, but a mind expanding way to visualize life and all of its retinue of difficulties.

I often wondered why I never fit into any particular group or discipline. Recently, I have understood that my mind fits the world like a butterfly looking for a tidbit of information here and a bit of data there and sampling the world’s crops of knowledge. Slowly, my mind pieces together those bits of information into reasonable streams of sensible answers for specific problems. Not only do I find the current difficulties solvable, but there are insta- tions for further exploration along those lines. The computer loosens the barriers of my thoughts and allows it to explore so many problems and solutions and eventually conjoins even the strays of my ideas tossed in the air. I feel emancipated ... free to think and feel and believe again.

About six years ago, I had a small stroke. All I could do was sit there and feel ineptitude ooze across my mind like a veil of darkness. I could no longer read English and understand it. The page was a series of printed symbols which no longer held meaning. At first I panicked, then lapsed into immediate depression, then became pensive about what we go from here. I was able to obtain a computer through the generosity of a merchant and began a systematic rehabilitation based on the computer, its thought patterns and its games. I was fool, therapist and patient in one, but I made very rapid improvement and began to read again. I had this kind of internal understanding, but expression of these thoughts took longer to achieve. Three years later, I was able to make my way hesitantly into Graduate School. I was eager to learn. I could finally understand my passion for information research and my ability to translate that knowledge to the general public. I have a gift that I would not have understood without my daily conversations with the computer. The “thinking machine” provides me with an ability to examine all the situations around me, re-associate their meanings and parameters and come to some very original ideas that can help our library and perhaps those of the future.

The computer allows us to find our strengths and correct our weaknesses. It allows us the ability to explore all ideas, even those that seem strange or off-the-wall. It supports our adventures even when people around us do not. I remember buying my first computer. Well, actually, my husband bought it because he had a fascination for mechanical devices. I found it an immediate intrusion on my life, a competitor for my husband’s attention. I stroked it every day but kept my distance. One day, I sat down, turned it on, and began a communion that has intensified each day of my life. Sometimes I believe it is the machine which puts life in my fingers. Perhaps, it is because I have been a person reliant upon touching and feeling the words and sounds of life, that this computer has enhanced that ability to once again communicate my unbound thoughts. Poetry flows with a power that impresses. Fiction seems to run from my fingertips with each touch of the keys. And now, I am able to conjure process changes for work and develop lists of routine instructions that actually make sense.

I cannot even begin to think about my library work without the computer. Yes, I remember the “good old days” of card catalogs, manual typewriters, scrapers, electronic erasers, embossers, pens, pencils, rulers, and even the first days of photocopyers. I remember the labor intensive days which never allowed the freedom to spend time wondering about the number of construction and subject headings, or the variety of serials problems. We would not have had the opportunity to set up electronic preprint libraries, worry about vendors and publishers from our technical services perspective, or even track the changes in the field. The computer has indeed matched us up in a charismatic and fruitful combination of needs and services that will carry us to the Charleston Conference and other meetings throughout the years to seek advice and share information. Yes, our “information cooperative” is unique and wonderful and services millions each day. For as much as I observe people utilizing the computer as a mindless machine doing the business of the day, I see our group observing, gathering information, and currying the favor of the “mindful coordination of parts and thoughts” for the higher purposes of resolve and creative manipulation. We have important and unique tasks to complete and do so with the teamwork of the best software and hardware possible in this new age of knowledge expansion. We will work hard to see that it continues in this manner.

Lost in Austin

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On April 17, 2004, I released another book at another airport. My first release was on March 15, 2004 at the Will Rogers World Airport and the book was The Poorhouse Fair by John Updike.

The second book, released on April 17 was Self-Consciousness: Memoir, also by John Updike. I left it at Gate 23 at 10:30 a.m. at the Austin-Bergstrom International Airport.

Why Updike? I didn’t start out to make a statement about him but I already have, but before I talk more about Updike, I should satisfy your curiosity and explain what I do when I release a book.

The first thing is to select a book, probably a paperback that I have read and perhaps read and appreciated the book enough to want to share it. Next I go to www.bookcrossing.com where I register the book and watch with pleasure as a photograph of the very book in my hand appears on the screen. One day I am going to register one that is out of print and without an ISBN to see what happens.

After I register the book, I download (Adobe) a copy of the bookmark/release statement. In marked spaces, I write the book cross-identification number BCID and my name and the date of registration. This form is pasted inside the front cover of the book. In Oklahoma continued on page 88

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