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Book Reviews -- Monographic Musings

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Book Reviews — Monographic Musings

Column Editor: Debbie Vaughn (College of Charleston) <vaughnd@cofc.edu>

Column Editor's Note: Ahh, spring: how wonderful it is awakening to air that feels fresher; skies that seem bluer, and grass that is greener and softer under your feet. Public radio host Garrison Keillor spoke of the onset of the season in the April Fool’s Day edition of A Prairie Home Companion — “it has arrived!”' Of course, A Prairie Home Companion would not exist were it not for the Corporation for Public Broadcasting and the public radio network. Jack Mitchell has written an engaging work regarding the inception and growth of the medium entitled Listener Supported: The Culture and History of Public Radio.

Interestingly, public radio’s predecessor, educational radio, began producing in the first half of the twentieth century a program called School of the Air, through which programs for public school use were broadcast. Happy reading, everyone! — DV


Reviewed by Debbie Vaughn (College of Charleston) <vaughnd@cofc.edu>

Jack Mitchell, public radio veteran, offers unparalleled insight into public broadcasting in his book Listener Supported: The Culture and History of Public Radio. Part history and part autobiography, Mitchell’s book forewarns readers of the unavoidable biases in his writing; someone with a symbiotic relationship with public radio, whose values shaped and were shaped by it, understandably might have a difficult time separating subjectivity and objectivity. In essence, Mitchell is the Adam of National Public Radio. He was NPR’s first employee. He “did the first NPR newscast, wrote its first strategic plan, wrote its first standards and practices document, and served as the first permanent producer of NPR’s seminal program, All Things Considered” (x). So it is only fitting that someone so intimate with the development of the Corporation for Public Broadcasting and the birth and growth of NPR should record his corporate knowledge. Mitchell’s account is divided into 13 chapters which are parcelled into three sections: “Dreams,” “Reality,” and “Critics.” A summative conclusion, notes, bibliography, and index are included.

In the first chapter, “The Progressives,” Mitchell explores the historical footings of publicly-supported, not-for-profit news media. He likens the birth of listener-supported media to the progressives of the early twentieth century, recalling John Dewey’s stance that the media should champion democracy. Fast forward a few years and you land in Mitchell’s second chapter, “Pioneers,” in which he outlines the birth of the British Broadcasting Corporation and the battles to create a similar non-commercial system in the United States through university broadcasting, Pacific stations, and educational radio. Mitchell’s third chapter, “Public Radio,” narrates the medium’s narrow escape from landing on Washington, D.C.’s cutting room floor. At this point, Mitchell’s writing morphs from interesting to passionate as he pays homage to the forefathers of the Corporation for Public Broadcasting — broadcasting, not merely television — and their thankless and unrecognized efforts to get public radio off the ground. “Purposes,” the fourth chapter, recap the quest for a mission and vision for NPR and the drive to steer away from elitist notions of “the best” programming (in the same spirit that it is “best” to eat spinach because it nutritious and “good for you”).

Chapters five through 11 probe six of NPR’s mainstays and other

continued on page 62

Against the Grain / April 2006 <http://www.against-the-grain.com> 59
work, and your environment. Contemplative practices allow us to develop a capacity for deep concentration, usually in silence, to quiet the mist in the midst of the action and distraction that fills everyday life. This state of calm centeredness provides effective stress reduction and can also help address issues of meaning, values, and spirit. Contemplative practices can help people develop greater empathy and communication skills, improve focus and concentration, reduce stress and enhance creativity."

Together, these efforts by scholars, organizations, and many private individuals (who are turning to gardening, yoga, and other contemplative pursuits in droves) suggest a growing realization that we need new practices to cope with a new environment, and that mindfulness or related contemplative practices are the place to begin. The good news is that this is not just your problem; it’s our problem — it’s a problem that we must solve as individuals, yes, but also as a society. So while I like to say (somewhat facetiously) that one of the best things about resourcefulness is that it drove me to meditation, it is not in jest that I say I hope others will also feel inspired to take back their moments — after all, moments are all we really have — and use mindfulness practices to find peace and clarity amid the incessant stream of information enveloping us. I hope we will all join the work that has begun to transform our lives so they are as healthy and effective as possible, so we feel rejuvenated and vitalized by the challenges in our work and the vast potential of technology, rather than worn out by its demands."

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Endnotes

1. I would like to thank Diane Grover, Electronic Collections Coordinator at University of Washington Libraries, for inspiring this article through a conversation I had with her in July 2005 about how focusing on only one thing at a time, and taking age- 
gerative control and discipline in one’s use of email, improves one’s ability to manage resources.

2. Zen can be translated from the Japanese as “contemplation” or “enlightenment” but is also the Japanese name for a branch of Mahayana Bud- dhism that was originally practiced in China. (If you have the radical trust required of readers of a collaborative, user-created encyclopedia, see the explanation in wikipedia: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zen). It should be considered a philosophy, way of life, or practice; as much or more than a religion, for Zen and other forms of Buddhism do not involve worshiping a god; Zen does not address the question at all.

3. The phrase “Zen and the art of...” was first used in a title of a book in 1953 in Eugen Herrigel’s Zen in the Art of Archery, but was popularized more broadly by a book that is ironically not directly about Zen: Robert Pirsig’s Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance (1974).


8. Quotes are taken from “Shoghi’s” summary of Levy’s LITA closing keynote in the blog on: “Information and the Quality of Life: Environmentalism for the Information Age (take 1)” October 2nd, 2005 at: http://itshblog.org. It is relevant to note that the single comment on this blog entry (as of 10/29/05) makes the suggestion that everyone “Make a daily and a weekly space for silence and solitude,” and recommends a kind of mindfulness meditation practice.


10. See http://www.contemplativemind.org/