If you are interested in leading a discussion, acting as a moderator, coordinating a lively lunch, or would like to make sure we discuss a particular topic, please let us know. The Charleston Conference prides itself on creativity, innovation, flexibility, and informality. If there is something you are interested in doing, please try it out on us. We’ll probably love it...

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Send ideas by July 31, 2013, to any of the Conference Directors listed above.

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Pelikan’s Antidisambiguation — Catching Up...

Column Editor: Michael P. Pelikan (Penn State) <mpp10@psu.edu>

A new year has begun, and with it, my return to Against The Grain, following an absence beginning in October. This issue’s column began as “catching up…” — observations collected over the period that didn’t make it into columns not produced during my absence. It has coalesced, however, into less of a laundry list and more of just a few pointed comments.

My absence was the result of fusion surgery to repair three vertebrae in my lumbar spine. The doctors did a marvelous job, horsing things into alignment, restoring correct spacing, and liberating nerves that had been mashed in the maelstrom of colliding forces. Recovery, while a long, tedious process, has been far better than the conditions that prevailed beforehand!

Nevertheless, I underwent a sustained, strictly-enforced period of extreme rest and absolute caution — an extended period during which the governing rule was “No BLT” — that is, no bending, lifting, or twisting.

So, for several months I observed the world, in all honesty, from an even more bemused point of view than I normally do.

During this period I pulled out several reading projects that had been sitting in the “if I ever manage to get the time” category for seemingly forever. For one, I re-read Churchill’s history of the Second World War. I had read it once before, and that was in my twenties. I got a lot more out of it this time.

An aside: the impact of encountering Churchill’s writing once again was enormous! The man could use the language! Modern form seems laughably crude in comparison, especially after a period of immersion in Churchill’s information-dense, nuanced, meaty prose! And most astonishing of all: Churchill, it seems, managed to write his monumental works on his own. That he could do this and keep up with his email, his tweets, his blog, and his texting is astonishing! (uh….)

I also listened to music, watched some great movies, old and new, and revisited some favorite 1960s television. Basically, I consumed the output of others, in several media, and tried to keep from going mad from inactivity.

This, of course, provided the opportunity (read: excuse) to get my hands onto a new “best buddy,” in this case, a Kindle Fire HD, the 7-inch model. Yes, I parachuted myself right into Amazon’s ecosystem and handed myself over saying, “Alright, you guys can watch me reading and listening and watching — just keep the content coming and so easy to get at!” After these many weeks of heavy use the conclusion is inescapable: for the consumption of the works of others, and those works in several media, this is a near-perfect purpose-built solution.

One certainly wouldn’t want to write Moby Dick on a Kindle Fire HD, but reading on it is a pleasure. And Amazon makes sure there are no obstacles to getting more content. Imagine that. They seem to have some idea what they’re doing. I wonder where they get the money to develop all this great stuff.

Then, long about six weeks post-op, it became time to start thinking about a gradual, very cautious, very tentative return to activity. As I began to reach outward again, I quickly discovered that even my very light laptop was still far too much to handle. Just the act of lifting it from a bedside table provided an immediate lesson in the limits of portable leverage. So that brought up the matter of finding a more content-creation-oriented device than the 7-inch Amazon tablet.

After some casting about for a “business-suited” tablet, I took the suggestion of a co-worker and checked out the new Google Nexus 10.