

InfoTech Column

Due July 5, 2006

Information Outlook, August 2006 Issue

Sanctuary

*Ten thousand people, maybe more
People talking without speaking
People hearing without listening
People writing songs that voices never share
And no one dared
Disturb the sound of silence*

...

*Hear my words that I might teach you
Take my arms that I might reach you
But my words, like silent raindrops fell
And echoed
In the wells of silence*

...

*And the sign said, "The words of the prophets are written on the
subway walls
And tenement halls
And whispered in the sounds of silence*

Simon and Garfunkel

Lee Rainie of the Pew Internet and American Life Project has told me that the average Millennial is a multi-tasker and that they cram 8:33 hours of time spent with media into 6:21 hours. This covers TV, video, music, reading, radio, and using computers. They practice "continuous partial attention". This is, of course, not the same as multi-tasking. To quote Lee, they also have "the need for sanctuary", and need "contemplative space", and maybe need an occasional "technology Sabbath." Arrghhh! Multi-tasking to the max combined with quiet time. Where do they find the time? Then again, while they may be listening to music, creating content and IM'ing their buddies all at once, their parents are working in situations where they are receiving Blackberry messages while they're in meetings, or checking e-mail while participating in conference calls (admit it – you do it!), or even writing their *Information Outlook* column at the cottage after checking and responding to e-mail and writing a future meeting agenda. So here I find myself inspired to write a column on how (and why) to get away from it all. Don't worry; the irony isn't lost on me!

I sit here at the cottage thinking that I am in a place of great beauty. Lake Erie is looking lovely although smelling bad from the lake's algae. I've seen more birds this year than usual – orioles, swallows, finch, robins, woodpeckers, lake gulls,

terns, vultures, hawks, owls, mourning doves, and more. We have a single line telephone and dial-up web access. No broadband and three out-of-range cell phones. The TV is on an antenna – an antenna! And we still get more channels than there were when I was a kid. I had almost forgotten what ghosts and static were like. Anyway, in my technocratic context, this feels like Neverland! Far from the madding crowds.

According to Sam Harrison, “Italians take 42 vacation days per year. The French take 37 days. Germans take 35. And Americans? 13 vacation days per year.” We need to rest to think and invent. Workaday stress, fighting fires, and meeting deadlines is not the optimal environment to invent, dream, vision and think differently about our challenges. We must take time to relax but in our culture it’s often frowned on when you take too much time!

To think, perchance to invent.

So how can the sounds of silence help? There are great benefits to taking time to reflect. The new book *ideaspotting* had a few suggestions that I’ll add a few of my own to here (remembering that I am a rank amateur on this topic):

1. *Underplan your vacation.* Leave time for serendipity. Take that path not traveled or planned. Do the side trip that discovers the great waterfall, garden or vista. How does it feel? Remember the feeling so you’ll recognize it when it happens in your daily life. Then act on it.
2. *Remember recess?* Remember all those things you learned about games and human dynamics when no one was “teaching” you? Reconnect with those feelings and moments.
3. *If you’re stuck, move.* You know that feeling when you realize you’ve been sitting trying to solve a problem for an hour and all you’ve got to show for it is an hour wasted? Don’t just keep at it. All you’ll get is frustrated and that telltale stomach cramp. Move. Sometimes just standing up and taking a walk around the office can liberate that creative energy. Move outside. Go to a different coffee shop than your usual one. Stare at a garden, snow mound or view. Take your mind away from the problem to discover the solution. Also, it counts as moving to try a different website, search engine or music service.
4. *Change your environment.* If you’re feeling blocked, do something different. For instance take a quick trip to an art gallery (it doesn’t have to be a big one!). Museums, fine art stores, Chinatown, craft shows - anything that is out of your regular schedule can loosen the creative synapses.
5. *Play.* It’s not hard to have a few toys in your office. I have an Etch-a-Sketch, assorted cartoon characters, Magic 8-Ball, Rubik’s Cube, Slinky, Blocks, Kaleidoscope, and more on my desk. I’ve been known to travel with a few too. I find sitting still for ten minutes and just playing a little unblocks my creativity quickly. Try it. Playing isn’t just for kids. It’s serious learning. There’s something about short play periods that refreshes the brain and your energy.

6. *A change is as good as a rest.* All work and no play makes Jack (or Jill) a dull boy (or girl). Take a course in something outside of your normal path. For instance I've taken many courses in Ikebana (Japanese flower arranging) and stained glass art. Each broadened my thinking and each has an underlying philosophy. My insights grew because I spent time in another world using another part of my brain. It's so out-of-the-box that it inspires you. In this case I developed an appreciation for the artistic side of life and have applied it with new respect for those web designers who have an artistic talent.

"An average worker's functioning IQ falls ten points when distracted by ringing telephones and incoming e-mails." (from a Hewlett-Packard press release)

7. And lastly, find sanctuary from your technology. Technology is a wonderful thing. Obviously, I think it's particularly great. However, librarians real value-add isn't in the routine running of technology, blogs, search engines and communication devices. It is in the creative ways we employ our brains and talents. It's in the small, daily creative acts of doing great research, in finding creative solutions to information problems and in applying our personal humanity to the interpersonal situations we engage in every day. Will the world fall apart if you don't take your cel to lunch or break?

Summer Reading List...so far

So, where can you liberate your mind to think about things in a different way? Why reading of course! And reading that old dead tree format surely helps. So far I've found the following books great this summer. I read them at a leisurely pace and truly tried to absorb their ideas. You might find them interesting too.

ideaspotting: How to Find your Next Great Idea by Sam Harrison. (How Books, 2006) Short read. Big impact.

Change the Way You See Everything: Through Asset-Based Thinking by Kathryn D. Cramer. (Running Press Book Publishers, 2006) This book is an amazing intervention on your thinking and attitudes.

Whatever you Think, Think the Opposite by Paul Arden. (Portfolio Trade, 2006) I actually bought this book for my daughter too. I am that hoping it helps her find new views in photography.

The Long Tail: Why the Future of Business is Selling Less of More by Chris Anderson. (Hyperion, 2006) You should also subscribe to his blog. This is one of the most important works of the year for libraries. Don't miss it.

Enjoy the rest of your Summer. And try to practice sanctuary all year long. Listen to the sounds of silence.

Stephen Abram, MLS is Vice President, Innovation, for SirsiDynix and the President-elect of SLA. He is an SLA Fellow and the past president of the Ontario Library Association and the immediate past president of the Canadian Library Association. In June 2003 he was awarded SLA's John Cotton Dana Award. This column contains Stephen's personal perspectives and does not necessarily represent the opinions or positions of SirsiDynix. Stephen would love to hear from you at stephen.abram@sirsidynix.com.

,