Facing Backward on the Progress Train: Part I
by Emilio Degrazia

Thinking about Health Care
by Rhoda Gilman

Sweet Bells Jangled: Laura Redden Searing: A Deaf Poet Restored
reviewed by Lucy Brusic
Editorial Notes

The announced theme of this issue of the Forum was “the health care problem.” Rhoda Gilman graciously came through with a themed article in which she outlines some of the philosophical problems behind the question of whether the United States can deliver health care both safely and efficiently. Books have been written about the later question; I am glad that Rhoda was able to distill the philosophical issues into a short essay.

In the meantime, I received a two-part reflection from Emilio Degrazia, “Facing Backward on the Progress Train” is a splendid reflection on aging, philosophy, religion and American history. Then I also received a copy of Judy Yaeger Jones’s book on Catherine Redden Searing, a Deaf poet of the nineteenth century. As it is my policy to review books by MISF authors when I can get a copy of them, I included a review of this book in this issue.

As a result, the theme of this issue of the Forum is something more than health care. Of course, the fact that Catherine Redden was educated in the Missouri School for the Deaf and that Emilio Degrazia’s father is 98 are comments on health care, but to elaborate on such a connection would stretch my editorial capacity and the reader’s credibility.

Rather it seems to me that the connective thread in this issue is history and how we relate to it. Gilman begins by saying that “since the beginning of human time, physical health has been associated with spiritual health.” Jones and her co-editor, Jane Vallier, explain the place of Catherine Redden in the nineteenth century. Emilio Degrazia is struggling with his place (rather one should say our place) in American history; he uses the metaphor of riding backward on a train to review the various philosophical and religious systems that have formed and informed American history.

What I find intriguing is that all of these people ground their thinking in an historical perspective — not necessarily a common point of view in the United States — certainly not in an election year when we are constantly told how much better the future will be. History is not a popular subject in American schools and, to my horror, I find that it is not always a required subject in college curricula.

Too often history has been perceived as a dead weight keeping us from moving forward. Perhaps the short reflections in this issue will show how history can be a firm place from which to push off into new waters.

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The next issue of the Forum will appear in January. It will contain Part II of Emilio Degrazia’s “Facing Backward on the Progress Train.” In addition, the announced theme of the issue is “how the work place has changed.” I would happily receive reflections on “how the world has changed.” I look forward to hearing from you. The deadline is January 10, 2005.

Lucy Brusic

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FACING BACKWARD ON THE PROGRESS TRAIN: PART I

by Emilio Degrazia

This I saw when waking late,
Going by at a railroad rate,
Looking through wreaths of engine smoke
Far into the lives of other folk.

(Robert Frost, "On the Heart's Beginning to Cloud the Mind")

I was going back again—to Dearborn, city of my birth just outside Detroit, and to my father, 98, still present and alert. Detroit, sprawling incoherently beyond the invisible walls that lock much of its black population into its grim core, is not one of my favorite destinations. I think of Detroit as a failure, its old elegance and centrifugal power in ruins as people take to the freeways to get away to their suburban retreats. Detroit is a place to abandon rather than call home.

And sitting there, just a few minutes from that inner city, my father waits in silence for the inevitable. His simple Christianity chimes with his indifference to what's happening in the world. The troubles he's seen in his lifetime and the promise of heaven make it easier for him to let go. To his indifference, call it carelessness about the fate of the world, I bring my humanistic learning, the college degrees that have given me a faith in democracy, science, and the possibility of improving the world.

We share long silences.

Therefore it's difficult to hurry, let alone fly, to him. The Greek stories of Phaeton, Icarus, and Bellerophon, arrogant heroes whose flights drive them too fast and too high toward fatal falls, make me suspicious of vehicles that are heavier than air. The train, locked in place on iron rails, will do.

As I board I'm pleased when the porter, a gentleman well past early retirement age, lifts my heaviest bag on board and smiles. Then he gives me an option that hadn't occurred to me before. Do I want to sit facing forward, or move two cars back so I can sit with my back to the front of the train? "Me," he said, "I like the caboose, but now we don't have a caboose."

It suddenly seems important to keep an eye out for a caboose. So I pick up my bags and move toward the rear of the train, pleased to find a window with a view. In a seat facing back.

As I settle in I congratulate myself on the wisdom of taking the train. In my sixty-plus years I've logged hundreds of thousands of miles behind the windshield of a car. Six hundred more from Minnesota to Michigan seem easy enough. But I've always hated squirming behind the wheel mile after highway mile, resisting the temptation to gaze at landscapes beyond the taillights of the truck I no doubt will plow into one beautiful day. And serious rear-view mirror gazing is taboo. Only glances are permitted there, none long enough to let me see the actual face of the person behind the chrome teeth and eyes tailgating me.

I feel it as I settle in, how the train requires a certain surrender from me. If an auto provides opportunities to stop, detour, and go again, a train has a one-track mind. What can we do but settle back and trust the iron, steel and computers that have configured our route and destiny? It's a bit like joining the army or church, without any obligation to serve.

I'm not sure why it so suddenly seems right to face backward on the train. Now and then when a new insight sneaks up and grabs me from behind, it gives me just enough slack to keep me in the dark about how it's holding me. When I suddenly turned fifty it was unthinkable to imagine myself middle-aged; I was too young to be half-spent, and living to a hundred seemed absurd. When I suddenly turned sixty it was harder still to feel that my life was mostly spent. The decade markers, so suddenly present to my mind, had swept by like freeway road signs glimpsed through the windshield of a car.

So what am I to make of my inclination to sit facing backward on a train? That I have ripened—have come to terms with the fact that I am, well, old? That life, The (Only) Life I have to live from now on, probably lies not in what could be but in what has been? That I have little to look forward to except to surrender myself to uselessness? As the train crosses the Mississippi into Wisconsin fields I find myself facing my old Papa. He's waiting for me in his favorite chair, a sad smile on his face. He's come a long way—from a small southern Italian village where he was born in 1906, a rugged place where roads knew only mule carts, and from there he crossed the

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Atlantic and migrated westward from New York westward to Pennsylvania and his eventual homestead just outside Detroit. I've traveled too—to visit Europe's art and monuments, his village too—but where in these journeys do we find common ground?

As I settle more comfortably into my seat I gaze out at the landscape in the hope of finding what needs to be said. I'm traveling through the Heartland, the middle of Wisconsin fields, my Minnesota home distancing itself as the train races into a darkness approaching from the east. A dawning occurs as I look at the western sky in front of me. All things in the landscape there—the trees, the farmhouses, the hills behind the houses, the clouds behind the hills—all move slowly, the whole scene widening, becoming more inclusive, as the train speeds away from it. A revolutionary rack-focus shift occurs right then, the kind that unscrews the eyes the way an Escher illustration lures us to see blacks and whites, then a fish and a bird and then whole schools of black fish and flocks of white birds evolving into new forms as the scene transpires.

The past begins to expand

The train's speed seems transformed by the new view. In the past, all those years spent looking forward to the future, events rushed blindly past. All those years I seemed driven by a wide-eyed urgency to get to the next interesting landmark, or have it get to me. And as it arrived it suddenly disappeared, to a place usually out of sight and soon out of mind. Birthdays, lovers, friends, wins and losses kept hurrying by, slowing as they approached and then rapidly entering some gray black hole of the mind. But as I sit backward with the train rushing me forward into a future blindsiding me, the past begins to expand onto a landscape that deepens as it slowly recedes out of sight. Time slows in the backward view, giving me longer pauses in which to consider my blessings and wounds. I can't see where I'm going, but I begin to see where I've been while racing wide-eyed toward some presumed destiny. I visualize how unfree I've been, how my personal destinations are way stations of a fate unfolding against a background of historical necessity. There, in that background, my future seems all past.

The more I gaze out, especially when the train speeds up, the more clearly I see that my present—except as a word signifying, depending on context, this moment (however long), this hour, day, year, this modern era—does not exist. Where is it, this present, and how long or short a space of time is "now"? Can "now" be reduced to a dot? Can that dot be halved, then halved again and again until Zeno smiles and says, "Enough, you go too far with this nonsense. We get the point."? The point is that no now is ever present. In speaking of it, thinking of it, it no longer is. So where did it "go"? Into what we call the past. So where do we live? Certainly only in fictive time, a future constructed on what we anticipate and dream, moiling with a past invented by memory that forgets, reshapes, pools, and distances itself as we speak, while imagination offers its possible story-lines to us.

The train lurches to a stop, and everything—the clouds drifting overhead, the weeds in the ditch bent by the breeze, the cars driven past the station stop, the drifter on the platform lighting a cigarette—also seem part of a slow motion stream I have never stepped in before. I stand to stretch but everything, especially what I think I know, stands weak-kneed on a wobbly foundation.

As it departs again I sit back and see the train as symbol of historical force lugging Progress (and my father) from eastern cities farther west, each new settlement spawned along the way swelling with hope, ambition, and commodities. Go West young man, look forward to the future. You have a bright future before you. The past—the rusty wastelands of Pittsburgh and New England factory towns—is behind you, dead, something to bury. While bulldozers plow through the old rubble, language establishes the fields and direction of vision, its views fixed to the extent that we submit to the habits its words impose on us. Though the western sky and its sunset colors signal the end of days and lives, the west stubbornly persists as the imaginary space where opportunity, freedom and youth reside. Meanwhile, as the east, fictive home of the dead and buried past, routinely refreshes us with dawn and the promise of new life, to that space—dimming as we imaginatively travel from old New England to Old World Europe and from there to muddled, teeming, undifferentiated Orient—we figuratively turn our backs.

So language has tricked me all along to see the world in lights not entirely of its own making. The generic high school commencement speeches touting individualism, with all their bright future promises, catch up to us, these illuminated tomorrows dooming me to imagine that unintended consequences are controllable because all is predictable and therefore foreseen. Endless opportunity bathed in the lovely light of an early evening sunset. Therefore I have never been in the future's control and never out of control. In this view the actual facts—my personal stories, my imaginative invention of my selves—have featured me as individual conforming to the requirements of an ending Hollywood would approve. In short, I have been a good American, convinced that everything will turn out okay.

The train screams out a warning as it approaches a crossroad in a small town that passes before I catch its name. What did I just miss? Henry David Thoreau, offended by the noise of trains, no doubt would have turned his back to the engine had he found any benefit in going anywhere at a railroad rate. In his essay "Walking," one of the first self-help meditations on how to progress one step at a time, he does not subscribe to the bright future scenario. "From the West fruit," he says, giving support to Whitman's faith that it is the manifest
Sitting Backward on the Progress Train

destiny of American technology to bridge the chasm between East and West, but "from the East light." Skeptical of imperial ambitions, however spiritualized, Thoreau stubbornly insists on the need to go over the mysteries of nature one slow step at a time. He would not have been surprised at how Americans in the twentieth century faced forward in trains while spending half the century relegating others to the back of the bus. No wonder he preferred to climb a tree. From that height he, good Protestant, could separate himself from the crowd and its mass of superfluous goods. For him a spiritual pilgrimage undertaken from such a modest high would allow him to go in and down to proper depths.

The trains that disturbed Thoreau's peace were, for me in my boyhood, objects of awe. Standing next to one on display made me feel puny, its enormity stunning my belief that a thing this massive and weighty could glide swiftly along iron rails. But these monsters seemed equal to whatever challenge lay ahead in all the futures I looked forward to. On my first train ride it would have been unthinkable to face the caboose. The biggest little thrill was to get a glimpse of the engine as it pulled its long tail of cars around a curve. The thing had a head, a glaring eye, and a voice warning everything to get out of its way, because there was no stopping it.

This sense that we are in control of a destiny inevitably driving us to a better future has been the American way, our enterprising forward-looking settlers the New Adams in the New World Eden. Backgrounded in the story line is that we, Adam's children, became progressive enough to wage several uncivil wars. One wonders: If it's natural for the progressive optimism of youth to devolve—or mature—into the conservatism of age, then are nations also bound to experience a youth, disillusionment, and eventual sunset years? And do nations, like children, die young when born in terrible deprivation and strife? And do a few, such as ours conceived in relatively prosperous and idealistic circumstances, drift into delusion stubbornly insisting that youth is the only valid season of life?

The self-division the American nation violently unleashed on itself during the Civil War gave the body politic its most dramatic opportunity to mature. But the Civil War's "skirmishes," which stamped red badges of courage on the millions victimized on both sides, resulted in the conviction that we had suffered little more than a national bloody nose. Whitman, sure that grass was sprouting over the graves of the Civil War dead, mirrored the national spirit well. Great good would come of the war. Did America contradict itself? Well, then, let it have its Civil War. America was large. It could contain and sacrifice multitudes as it looked forward to the twentieth century, confident that its morale and superior technology would carry it to victory in future wars.

It is America's future wars, particularly its present and future ones, that blur my vision as I sit facing backward on the train. The old wars—eighteen foreign wars beginning with the intervention in the Philippines in 1899—are invisible in the landscape greenery, all their death, destruction and sorrow as silent as the lush growth slowing distancing itself from the tracks. The greenery tempts me to believe that war's violence is part of a recurrent process of historical cycles as natural as grass growing over graves, that this is the only mature conclusion to arrive at as survivor/beneficiary looking back at what America has wrought.

The suspicion dissipates as the train enters a new city or town. Here everything comes into better view as the engine crawls past anonymous warehouses and factories, their loading docks, piles of coal, junk and debris, their smokestacks silently sneaking waste into sky. Here I find myself in the dark bowels of America. Here is where the machinery of war is made and distributed. Here I see my destination, Detroit as vast industrial sprawl, and here I come to a profound sense of how unnatural we've become.

We cannot leave the past behind

I can't help taking this dark view with me as the train bursts into the green clearing again. Facing backward on the train I can't, like a good American, leave the past behind, bury all the violence, suffering and waste in some bottomless landfill of the mind.

I find companionship among a few others who have sounded this minor key, even when America was still mainly wilderness. Hawthorne, in his 1836 sketch "The Celestial Railroad," warned that modernity's technological genius, symbolized by the train, would provide American pilgrims no easy progress, no railroad to heaven. Almost a century later Ole Rolvaag wonderfully portrays that troubled immigrant woman Beret, her eyes trying to divine the meaning of life in the vast western skies, her heart shrinking from the threat approaching her little band of Lutheran settlers, the train itself, metallic serpent in the New World Garden, winding its way toward her through prairie grass on the South Dakota plains. Both Hawthorne and Rolvaag saw the knots beginning to tighten at the nexus where democracy, technology, materialistic prosperity, and religion meet. And both, by looking back at a Europe dimming and distancing itself as the New World became a settled fact, saw that the worm of Christian natural depravity, not wholly left behind in the Old World, was chewing away at the American progress myth.

America's fall would follow naturally, or unnaturally, enough.

Part II of this article will appear in the next Forum, Winter 2005.

Emilio DeGrazia, a longtime resident of Winona, has published two collections of poetry and two novels. He and his wife Monica have co-edited Twenty-Six Minnesota Writers (1995) and Thirty-Three Minnesota Poets (2000). Recently he completed Seasonings, his first collection of poetry, and he continues to work on a collection of creative non-fiction.
THE HEALTH CARE ISSUE

By Rhoda Gilman

Since the beginning of human time, physical health has been associated with spiritual health. Great religious teachers have often been great healers. These days we don’t worry much about spiritual health—or at least we say we don’t. And science has subjected the human body, like everything else in nature, to increasingly sophisticated control. We’ve mapped the human genome, peered at the interior with scanning devices, and learned how to replace worn-out parts. The result is a growing number of unresolved ethical/spiritual issues—and an appalling increase in health care costs.

Adding to the skyrocketing costs of high-tech machines, organ transplants, genetic testing, designer drugs, and life-support systems is the wilderness of overhead costs produced by multiple insurance plans. In Minnesota alone more than 200 health insurance companies operate, and most of those offer an array of different contracts that specify coverage, payment rules, and referral networks for different procedures. Hospitals and clinics are beginning to need as many bookkeepers as nurses. In addition there are the case reviewers who police doctors to be sure that they have considered cost as well as patient welfare in recommending treatment. Then there’s expensive advertising, lobbying legislators, and paying some of the highest CEO salaries in the economy. Typically, as much as thirty-percent of health insurance premiums go to non-medical administrative expenses.

It shouldn’t surprise us that we’ve addressed this problem in terms of our country’s de facto state religion — the so-called “free market” ideology of capitalism. Even our language reflects this. Healers have become doctors, and doctors have become health care providers. The ill and afflicted are no longer patients; they are customers or consumers. As a direct corollary, we place our faith in the divine hand of the marketplace to determine what and how much technology should be applied in extending life to the maximum, to distribute health care fairly, and to keep the costs down through competition in price and quality.

The result, of course, is chaos — for healing, like education, is a process not a product. Its success depends, in part at least, on faith in the provider, and price is never an object when human life hangs in the balance. Who among us is going to shop for a cut-rate oncologist or wait for a bargain sale in angioplasties? How many, in fact, will even delay admission to a hospital to study the ranking, facilities, and comparative prices of those available?

Other countries that face the same technological costs and the same problems of aging population, sedentary lifestyles, health-damaging habits, and toxic environments have taken a pragmatic approach. Clearly community health is a community problem, and they’ve treated it as such. There are a variety of systems, some better or worse and none perfect, but in general health costs are paid through taxes while the government controls profiteering and duplication of services by medical suppliers of all kinds. Administrative costs are comparable to those of Medicare in this country — about three percent.

As a result, health care costs per capita in other industrialized countries are as low as half of what we pay in the United States, and contrary to popular fantasy, the care is often better—at least by statistically objective measures such as life expectancy and infant mortality. In this country, however, ideology rules over pragmatism, even in the face of breakdown. While our bloated health care system accounts for fifteen percent of the nation’s gross product, the latest study—conducted by Families USA — shows nearly 82 million Americans without health insurance for some period (usually at least nine months) during the past two years.

Minnesota has fewer uninsured people (about nine percent) than most other states, not because costs are less, but because the state’s economy is strong. Here employers, through whom most health insurance is negotiated, are still paying for it. Needless to say, this places a competitive burden on Minnesota businesses—especially the smaller ones.

A study released in January, 2004, by the Harvard Medical School and Public Citizen found that a national health insurance program would have saved $286 billion dollars in overhead alone for the year 2003—enough to cover all the uninsured without an increase in cost to consumers. Minnesota’s share of the savings would have been nearly eight billion dollars. Yet even now neither major political party will back a program that in effect would extend Medicare to cover everyone and limit profiteering by drug companies and others.

Only when that basic minimum of fairness and efficiency has been achieved will it be possible to turn to the urgent ethical and philosophical questions raised by our increasing control over the human organism and its gene pool. How much is the social cost of extending life indefinitely—and should it be limited? To what degree should the genetic profile of a person enter into decisions regarding health and reproduction? Who should pay the real health costs of toxic emissions and wastes over a span of generations? How much responsibility must individuals bear in maintaining their own health?

Rhoda Gilman is a historian, political activist, and longtime member of MISF.
Book review

Laura Redden Searing, Nineteenth Century Deaf Poet


Judy Yaeger Jones, a member of MISP, stumbled onto the story of Laura Redden Searing while she was a project director for Minnesota Women’s History Month. It turns out that Glyndon, Minnesota (in the Red River valley) was named for Howard Glyndon—the pen name of Laura Redden Searing. (Glyndon is, in fact, the only town in the United States named for a woman writer during her lifetime.) Jones’s research eventually became this book: she recounts the details of Redden’s life in an introductory essay, “A Brief Biography of Laura Redden Searing.”

Laura Catherine Redden was born in 1839. At the age of 13, she contracted what was probably meningitis and lost her hearing. She completed her education at the Missouri School for the Deaf and became an accomplished journalist, writing under the pen name of Howard Glyndon for the St. Louis Republican. As the official civil war correspondent for the St. Louis Republican, Redden traveled to Washington, D.C., in 1861. From there she covered political and military news. In 1864, she published her first poetry collection: Idyls of Battle and Poems of the Rebellion. She made enough money from this collection to travel to Europe, where she met the Irish artist Michael George Brennan. Redden, who was 30, independent, and not planning to marry, nevertheless made plans to marry Brennan. For an assortment of reasons, she came back to the United States; before she could return to Europe Brennan had died of tuberculosis. An epic poem, Sweet Bells Jangled, writes of this love and Laura’s life; it was included in her second volume of poetry, Sounds from Secret Chambers (1874).

In later years, Redden married Edwin Searing and had a daughter by him. The marriage did not last; Laura and her daughter moved to California, where Laura continued to write poetry. She died in 1923.

Jones’s biographical essay is complemented in an essay by Jane Vallier, an assistant professor in English at Iowa State University. This essay is titled “Laura Redden Searing: A Restored Voice in American Poetry.” Vallier takes on the task of placing Redden in the context of nineteenth century poetry. She draws parallels between the life of Redden and the life of the better known Emily Dickinson: early writing, singular life, religious doubts, and isolation. Vallier explains that without a family name or a formal education, Redden had to wait for her peers to recognize her as a poet. Her pilgrimage to Europe was an important part of her education, and the experience of falling in love with Michael Brennan was the catalyst for her poetic fire. Vallier describes Redden as “a magician with symbols, rhythms, rhymes, [whose] work resonate[s] with the human heart.” (25)

The book concludes with 70 poems by Laura Redden Searing. I found that Redden Searing had a remarkable range of styles and voices. Her Civil War poetry gives one a renewed sense of the anguish and uncertainty the Civil War created for American families. Some of the autobiographical poems, especially “My Story,” are an insight into the terror of sudden deafness.

I was particularly amused by “A Girl’s Subterfuges” (Part I of Sweet Bells Jangled) in which Laura creates a dialogue between young women, such as herself, who do not wish to marry, and older women who see marriage as the only safe refuge for all women.

“Wilt thou be an ancient maiden?”
Say the matrons unto me;
“Wilt thou have no chubby children,
Clinging fondly to thy knee?”
“Ruddy matrons! happy mothers!
What are children unto me?”

“Wilt thou live alone forever?”
Say the matrons unto me,
Light I answer: “Who is single
Should be ever blithe and free,
Sober matrons! thoughtful mothers!
Liberty is sweet to me!”

... And I answer, lightly laughing,
What the matrons say to me:
“I am given to Diana,—
To the huntress, fair and free,—
And the lumpy, lovesick Venus
Hath no follower in me!”

Sweet Bells Jangled is a must-read for those concerned with the history of ASL and Deaf education. I would also commend this book to anyone interested in Civil War studies or in Women’s studies.


Lucy Brusic
President's Column

"Be true while there yet is time. For this is the cry of a thousand souls that down to the Pit have trod—Who keeps the Truth from the people stands in the way of God!

Leonard H. Robbins, The Truth and John Billington. Stanza

I've never been much for the god game, having seen too much false piety at an early age. But I was startled when a friend of mine, wife of a minister, referred to the "ReligBiz." I had thought that they took it seriously.

It's hard to tell nowadays what people are taking seriously. I've just returned from a foray into cyberspace, into what I understand is called "the Blogosphere." Let me tell you there's a whole lot of talking going on out there. Whether anyone is listening is another question.

With our election barely six weeks away and if we believe the pollsters, the candidates in a dead heat, one can only wonder what has happened to reality? How can so many people view the same facts so differently? Or do we now get to choose which reality we'd like? And are there consequences if we choose wrong or do we just go on to another reality? The mind boggles as the world seems to be turning itself inside out.

And then there is television. As I watched the pictures of the storm damage in Florida, I could have been looking at damage in Iraq. So now we have two places to rebuild. The irony of nature's treatment of Florida is not lost on many of us. Sometimes I think the Universe is trying to tell us something but we're making too much noise to hear.

Another irony not lost on some is the economic burden rebuilding Florida will have on the rest of the country. It would seem only a matter of time before states start measuring the amount they pay into the federal government and the amount they receive back. The brighter among us may speculate that some of us are subsidizing the ignorance of others, those who would rebuild on flood plain, for example, or in areas known to be hurricane prone.

If we want to carry speculation into the psychological sphere, we might wonder if humankind's need for variety and stimulation causes us to seek situations that will fly in the face of prudence.

Prudence seems a word in small regard these days. It may no longer be a public virtue — only the refuge of those too timid to chance the risks we see all around us or too aware of past experiences to rush in where caution bids otherwise.

I'm a person fond of analogy and metaphor — methods by which I seek to make sense of the world. As a librarian and a scholar, I see many examples of how the world reflects back its many facets to those who choose to attend to nuance.

Nuance, of course, like prudence seems to be in decline. Perhaps because it's French.

If one reveres the life of the mind, one can only recoil when one sees the battles and insults once reserved for schoolyard bullies now pollute our publicly owned airwaves and corrode our thought formation and decision making processes and all in the name of free speech.

Our country is becoming both a laughingstock and a fearsome bully on the planet — a Gulliver with a bad conscience, not tied down by civility and common purpose but seemingly determined to espouse one reality in contradiction to all evidence and all opposition.

There's a saying, "be careful what you wish for — you just may get it" and one wonders if those who seem so sure of their cause are comfortable with the cost their views are extracting from others?

I had the good fortune last week to attend two book signings at a nearby bookstore. The first was Howard Dean's, in which he tells us how to take back our democracy. The second was by Garrison Keillor, who reminded us of the virtues and values of a past era, one more prone to introspection in decision-making and less susceptible to the chatter of 'groupthink.' Many of us remember those days and would like our children and grandchildren to have the benefits of that intellectual atmosphere.

There is a tendency to equate technology with progress — certainly that is true in some cases. But in communications, where speed and distortion seem prevalent, we are seeing how our technological toys can undermine our democratic processes. When the story of Howard Dean's 'scream' gets repeated hundreds of times and causes a legitimate candidate's demise, democracy is the loser.

We are in strange times and America, once the hope of the world, may be in the process of finding out that we are not so exceptional after all. Like our democracy, it may have been just an illusion.

Shirley Whiting
Notes and News

Member News

Alice Schroeder, formerly vice-president, has been undergoing chemotherapy for pancreatic cancer. She is in our thoughts and prayers.

Ginny Hanson, formerly program chair, writes:

Great program on Thoreau and Emerson. That type of talk (even without the snazzy venue, posh buffet, and imported speakers) is what we used to offer, using our own members' expertise. We [had] fascinating programs, timely flyers (address and time in hand as one sallies forth). Personal phoning of the whole list managed to net 12-24 attendees (+ guests, if we were lucky) at each program...

Lionel Davis is working on a U.S. history project and is trying to set up a history discussion group.

Victor Machart, writes from Mountain Village, Alaska:
At the suggestion of friend Dave Juncker of Minneapolis I have enclosed a membership application for Minnesota Independent Scholars' Forum. Until I moved to Alaska in the fall of 1997, I had lived about half of my life in Minnesota...the other half in rural North Dakota. From 1993 until 1997 I lived and worked in the Twin Cities. I am currently a speech language pathologist for the Lower Yukon School District in southwest Alaska. At this time I am starting my eighth year with the district. I serve eleven Yupik Eskimo villages along the Yukon River and the Bering Sea Coast some 500 miles west of Anchorage. My hobbies include writing and photography.

Shirley Whiting, president of MISF, is recovering from knee replacement surgery.

Katherine Simon Frank writes:
I'll try to be more involved this year. Prior commitments have kept me away up to now. Sorry! The programs look so interesting.

David and Trudi Juncker have recently bicycled in France, hiked in Glacier National Park, and trekked in Nepal. When David is in town, he is a board member of MISF.

Philosophy Study Group

The MISF Philosophy Study Group continues to generate lively discussions on a broad array of philosophical topics. To this point, however, we have not been notably successful in solving any of them. We were totally unable to make any progress with Bell's inequalities and its implications for what quantum theory has to say about the universe. In the meantime we are going to look at Situation Ethics by Joseph Fletcher. First published in 1966, Situation Ethics created a stir within the Christian community by denying an absolute set of ethical standards which Christians are expected to abide by. Instead, every ethical situation needs to be approached separately and holistically. The one unequivocal rule is that of love.

The Philosophy Study Group meets at Curran's Restaurant in Minneapolis approximately every three weeks. For more information contact Curt Hillstrom (612-823-5132 or <curthillstrom@hotmail.com>.

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