

“The Final Word,” Reflections, Fall 2009

By: Baxter F. Ball, Head of School

(On Libraries)

I was astonished to read an article in The Boston Globe reporting on the recently launched “transformation” of the library at the Cushing Academy, an independent suburban Boston school for students in Grades 9-12.

At the direction of Cushing’s head of school, every one of the school’s more than 20,000 books will be discarded or given away (half are gone already) as Cushing’s entire library collection is moved to digital format. During this two-year “transformation,” the stacks in the library will be replaced by large flat-screen TVs that will project data from the Internet and students will require computers, Kindles or similar technology in order to access a book or periodical. Why this stunning, wholesale move from print to electronic medium? “When I look at books,” said Cushing’s head, “I see an outdated technology, like scrolls before books.”

I confess to seeing Cushing’s move as more “decimation” than “transformation.” In light of Manlius Pebble Hill School’s decision to commit significant resources, money, and effort to the construction of a new library media center, Cushing’s decision is perplexing and a touch intimidating. I have been forced to ask myself whether print books have, indeed, become the useless artifacts of an archaic culture.

It is a fact that reading is down substantially on a national scale and that young people, in particular, instead spend an inordinate amount of time texting, tweeting, and garnering snippets of information over the Internet. I am sufficiently “old school” to lament this trend and feel that young people are missing a great deal when they fail to lean back in a lounge chair every once in a while for a good read.

I am also concerned that reading for the purpose of obtaining information is increasingly being restricted to what people find on the Internet. What they find is information that is frequently out of context and lacking in depth, all too often opinionated and woefully lacking in objectivity. People tend not to approach “reading” on the Internet the way they approach reading books. On the Internet, they tend to surf for and choose only isolated tidbits of information. In the reading of books and periodicals, they usually can gain a far greater depth and breadth of information, as well as a more sophisticated understanding of the subject at hand.

I believe a library, of course, is more than simply a place to access information. It is also a place to reflect, to meditate, to think. It is a place to socialize, a place to share knowledge and to work cooperatively on projects. Libraries, like schools, lend themselves to an intellectualism that I fear new technologies, as essential as they are to our lives, often fail to promote.

The head of the Cushing Academy called the printed book an “old technology.” We must think very carefully about what we are losing when older technologies are eradicated. Indeed, the impending demise of the American newspaper is a direct result of the Internet’s capability of delivering information instantly. The art of thoughtful letter-writing, too, is disappearing in favor of the quick e-mail to which there is instantaneous response. This need for instant gratification is also reflected in the apparent egotism of blogging, tweeting, and texting. One wonders if there will one day be no room for a good journalist, one who has time to reflect on information and research a piece before it is published. That time for reflection is what allows for the evaluation of different points of view and results in reliable, objective reporting.

Undeniably, we all benefit enormously from the positive applications of modern information technology – but there are also liabilities in not continuing to embrace existing forms of communication and pathways to significant thought and development of sophisticated reasoning skills.

It is foolhardy to do away with real books, books you can touch and hold. Our new library media center will embrace both the print and the digital world – for there is a place for both, and they can coexist quite nicely in a library. Student debate, analysis, research, interactive communication, confrontation, and socialization will take place in our new library.

The printed word, I should like to advise the Cushing Academy, is not a useless artifact of the past. Reading a good book, I fervently believe, will always remain the central intellectual experience that a library affords.

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