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## In My Opinion: Life on the Editorial Page

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## In My Opinion: Life on the Editorial Page

Cooks cook. Tailors tailor. Professors profess.

But to whom do we profess, and why?

For most of us the primary answer is our students, of course, because we are educators foremost. As scholars and thinkers we also profess to our peers, through publications and at professional meetings, as a means of sharing knowledge. But when might we go beyond those boundaries, to write or speak to broader audiences or for other purposes? And if we do, how will we be received?

More than a decade ago I was offered an opportunity to break out of my professional comfort zone and write not just for a popular audience, but for a *local* one: to write for people I'd see in the grocery store and on the street and who could actually respond to me directly if they disagreed with my opinions. It wasn't an invitation to write history for, well, other historians, but rather to write about current events for my neighbors. I accepted with only minor trepidation triggered by the little voice in my head saying "But I wasn't trained to do that!" In the years since, I've written more than 150 columns for the *St. Cloud Times*, something in excess of 100,000 words produced in monthly gusts of opinion that have shifted in content but perhaps not that greatly in style over a period in which I've raised a family, earned tenure, relocated from the big city of St. Cloud to the small town of St. Joe, and learned a bit about the role of the academic in public discourse in the 21st century.

To a certain extent that little voice was right: I *wasn't* trained to write in 700-word blocks about current events. Like many of us I had toyed with writing poetry, song lyrics, short stories, and even started a novel at one point in my life, but almost everything I'd written for publication had been

in a detached professional voice, carefully researched and footnoted to eliminate any hint of “opinion” that might creep in to cast doubt on my conclusions. I had written some letters-to-the-editor over the years though, including one as a college student in 1987 that served as something of a model as I began writing for the newspaper regularly. I remembered the letter well because it was the first time I had something published in a major paper and the day it ran my undergraduate mentor dropped a copy of the paper on my desk at the start of class and said “nice piece in the *Oregonian* today.”

That letter didn’t become a model because it impressed my professor, but because it was one of my earliest attempts to think and argue like a historian outside of class, to an audience not comprised of other history majors or faculty. On November 11, 1987, I had attended the dedication of the Oregon Vietnam Veterans Memorial, a ceremony that moved me deeply not only because I had recently taken a class on the war, but because I had grown up around Vietnam-era veterans and their stories. When I went back to the dorm that evening I composed a letter to the *Oregonian* that — betraying the optimistic naïveté of a 19-year-old college student — argued that this would be the last war memorial we would ever dedicate because my generation, born during the Vietnam war and coming of age amidst its consequences, would never let it happen again. The letter took an observation of a current event, linked it through historical analysis to a broader issue, and called for action to improve things in the future. While that formula was not something I adopted consciously as a teenager it did in fact come to characterize the majority of the opinion pieces I’ve written for the *St. Cloud Times* since 2002.

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For my very first column I applied the formula to a topic that I knew something about: billboards. Not only did I drive by them every day, but a chapter in my dissertation had explored the history of billboard regulation in the United States. When I drove up I-94 toward St. Cloud for my job interview in 1998, my first visit to Minnesota in decades, I was shocked to see the proliferation of billboards in a state I associated with progressive values and quality environments. Certainly something

could be done about this, and what better than an opinion piece appealing to the universal distaste for the ever-growing forest of advertising along our highways? I could easily cite some historical examples and use data on the industry to support my argument that the billboards ought to go.

That first column wasn't hard to write, in part because I'd been ranting about billboards for years. What was hard, it turned out, was adjusting to newspaper conventions and AP style. Most of the opinion pieces I'd previously had published were in campus newspapers that were no doubt desperate for copy; when I sent something in they not only published it verbatim, they also used the title I supplied. But in the world of professional newspapers there are editors who tell you how much to write (no more than 700 words please!) and copy editors who not only mess with the paragraph structure and insert subheadings that break up your delightful prose, they also write all the headlines. My debut piece on billboards didn't get cut for length but it did shift from my original four paragraphs to nineteen! And what I thought was a catchy headline was replaced with a statement that seemed less a call to action than a quick summary cobbled together by an overworked intern.

Dateline: *St. Cloud Times*, September 4, 2002

## **Billboard glut ruins area scenery**

### ***Minnesota should push to restrict eyesore ads***

Central Minnesota's varied landscape of farms, prairie, lakes, and woodlands can be as attractive as any in the nation.

But unlike the residents of many other scenic travel destinations, Minnesotans have allowed the billboard industry to turn their major highways into commercial canyons lined with massive advertisements that block out the scenery and deaden motorists' appreciation for anything beyond the white lines of the road.

Perhaps this complacency is rooted in a sort of Lake Wobegon modesty about the quality of the local scenery, but it's time someone said enough is enough.

Opposition to billboards first appeared in the 1920s, when women's clubs around the nation began to decry the unsightly visual impact of roadway advertisements.

From the familiar "Chew Mail Pouch" tobacco ads painted on country barns to the slapdash placards choking the approaches to growing cities, the conflict between scenery and commercialism was urgent enough to prompt a series of attempts at regulation over the years, culminating with the federal Highway Beautification Act of 1965. Unfortunately for billboard opponents, the outdoor advertising lobby was able to win favorable amendments to that bill allowing signs in "commercial and industrial areas," which ultimately proved to be just about anywhere the industry wanted.

Today almost 500,000 billboards line our nation's highways, the heart of a \$5 billion dollar industry dominated by a small handful of corporations.

At an average cost of just 97 cents per view, billboards represent one of the least expensive means of advertising, but also one of the most intrusive.

You can turn off the television or radio, or choose not to read a newspaper or magazine, but billboards are everywhere. They have more in common with other forms of unwelcome, intrusive marketing — junk mail, telemarketing, and e-mail spam — than with the television commercials to which the industry would prefer we compare them.

Billboards also threaten the environment. Across our state and across the nation, thousands of trees are cut each year to improve or maintain billboard sight lines. A study by the U.S. General Accounting Office found a case where more than 1,100 trees were removed at just two billboard sites to improve visibility from an adjacent highway.

Even more trees are cut for poles to support the signs and to produce the paper advertisements. Worse still, dusk-to-dawn billboard lights require the equivalent of burning seven tons of coal per billboard per year to generate the necessary electricity to operate them, and the light pollution they produce obliterates the night sky for miles.

Have you ever noticed the “St. Cloud glow” from 10 to 15 miles away on the freeway? A significant part of that glare is the result of upward-directed billboard lighting.

The Outdoor Advertising Association of America would have us believe billboards provide necessary and useful information to consumers.

I think most people would disagree.

When was the last time you decided to purchase a product or service based on a billboard advertisement?

A survey in Rhode Island found that 72 percent of respondents received “little or no useful information” from billboards, a result that is mirrored in other studies. The list of top 10 brands advertised on billboards nationally in 2001 is dominated by fast-food chains, alcoholic beverage producers, and car manufacturers

— all companies familiar to most Americans and certainly not information “necessary” to the driving public.

Steps have been taken in many states and communities to reduce the billboard blight. Four states — Vermont, Maine, Hawaii and Alaska — have banned them completely. Several others prohibit the construction of new billboards, while county and municipal ordinances restricting billboard placement and lighting are on the books in hundreds of locales.

But here in Central Minnesota I see new, larger billboards going up all the time. And with each one comes an additional loss of scenery and more adverse environmental impacts.

It’s time we told the billboard industry enough is enough and started thinking about placing new restrictions on billboard construction, placement, size, and lighting before we’re left only to lament, in the words of poet Ogden Nash, that “Perhaps, unless the billboards fall, I’ll never see a tree at all.”

Though I didn’t realize it at the time, that first piece established some conventions that would appear in almost every subsequent column. It opened with an observation, either of a place or an event. It brought up the historical roots of the issue. Data was used to establish the impact of the status quo, and examples of other communities addressing the issue were offered. The column ended with a call to action, though in this case the suggestion to tell off the billboard industry could have been more forceful. A similar pattern of argument and call to action is evident in most of my columns, a totally unplanned byproduct of this initial venture onto the opinion page.

One aspect of this piece did not carry over however: the occasional use of the first person voice. While the billboard piece used first-hand

observations and direct statements of opinion (“I think ...”), I was never very comfortable with that approach. Soon after I shifted voice slightly to the first person *plural*, based on the belief that the plural form suggested I was talking *with* readers instead of *at* them and about issues of mutual concern. By presenting observations in a detached voice or through the pronoun “one” (“One can see that ...”) I tried to avoid debates over facts and instead focused on arguments and conclusions that led to action. Before long every column was ending with some sort of call to action, and instead of saying “you should do something about this” I included myself in the charge by using “we” in the closing paragraphs.

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A prime example of this approach came early in my second year as a columnist. That fall central Minnesota was rocked by a shooting at Rocori High School in nearby Cold Spring in which two young men were killed by a classmate. It felt deeply personal not because I knew the people involved, but simply because it was so close to home. I could imagine my own children being in a similar situation and it made me angry that we had not yet seriously addressed — much less solved — the problem of gun violence in our culture. In deciding to write about the tragedy just days after it occurred I was intruding on a community in shock and grief, so I tried to approach the topic with as much sensitivity as possible. I chose to do that by writing as a parent and focusing on the general topic of school shootings without directly mentioning Rocori or Cold Spring. And I wrote in the first person plural in an attempt to speak for the entire community.

Dateline: *St. Cloud Times*, October 1, 2003

### **Answering ‘why’ is not easy**

***We must all help children to prevent school shootings***

Pearl, Miss. West Paducah, Ky. Jonesboro, Ark. Springfield, Ore. Littleton, Colo. Santee, Calif. Cold Spring, Minn.

Suddenly, one of our own communities has been added



to the ever-growing list of towns struggling to make sense of a senseless tragedy, to help children grieve and heal, and ultimately to attempt to recapture a sense of safety that may have been forever lost. In these and other cities nationwide, lives have been permanently changed by acts of shocking violence perpetrated by children against other children, in places that above all else should be refuges from violence.

The question that lingers is always “why?”

While “why” is the hardest question to answer, “what” is all too easy. Since 1995 there have been more than two dozen shootings in American schools. Forty-three victims have died, not including the shooters. At least 115 people have been wounded. “When” and “where” are as plain as “here” and “now.” Formal investigations usually quickly determine “who.” But why is the question that always remains, eventually forgotten by all but the grieving until the next time breaking news interrupts our regular programming with shaky video of kids fleeing a school.

School shootings have become routine enough that we’re all familiar with the pat answers to why that the media will offer us: Too many guns. Too few guns. Spoiled kids. Kids not spoiled enough. Bad parents. Good parents, but bad kids. Big schools. Small schools. The shooter was a bully. The shooter was bullied himself. Not enough religion. Too much religion. Video games. Movies. TV. Alcohol. Drugs.

All convenient answers, but never enough to fully answer why.

In 2000, following the Springfield and Columbine attacks, the FBI published a list of warning signs based on intensive study of 18 school shootings. This “school shooter” profile included such traits as turbulent parent-child relationships, a sense of alienation, poor coping skills, failed love relationships, inappropriate humor, and the ironic phrase “treats some students better than others.” Anyone who has been around teenagers knows most adolescents exhibit these traits at one time or another. The FBI’s answer to why has basically been “because they are teenagers.”

The sad truth is that in most cases we will never know why. If we really knew what caused children to kill children, we would act to prevent it. Even the FBI knows that, and no doubt meant well with its useless profile. We often don’t even know why children commit the commonplace acts of lesser violence — the verbal, physical, and emotional abuses — that afflict many of their peers on a daily basis. But if we can’t know why, perhaps we can know “why not.”

The “why not” has to start with adults.

We must come to terms with the fact that all of us are responsible for raising our children. Not just their own parents, and not just parents in general, but everyone. There’s a great deal of truth to the “it takes a village to raise a child” cliché, something that was at least tacitly recognized only a generation ago.

But today’s adolescents are bombarded by messages telling them they are unwanted, that adults matter but children are unimportant. We begrudge them funding for adequate schools. We fail to intervene when they are hurt emotionally. We ignore behaviors that demand attention.

We elect politicians who slash social programs that provide the most vulnerable children with food, shelter, medical care and safe places to go after school. We are unwilling or afraid to speak to other people's children, even when they misbehave in public. We don't even bother to learn the names of the neighborhood kids anymore.

Parents and teachers acting alone will not be enough to answer why not. Kids need resources. We should collectively offer them. Kids need attention. We can volunteer it. Kids need role models within their own communities. We can provide them. Kids need supervision and discipline. We can supply both. Kids need love, support, and encouragement. We must make sure each get all they need. Rather than leaving them to ask why in the wake of another tragedy, we should give them reasons to believe it will never happen again.

The Ribbon of Promise National Campaign to End School Violence ([ribbonofpromise.org](http://ribbonofpromise.org)), an organization founded in the wake of the 1998 Springfield shooting, isn't particularly concerned with the why questions. Instead they focus on the why nots. Why not address the underlying problems leading to school violence? Why not have the courage to act before violence occurs? Why not admit it can happen anywhere, with anyone's child, and work together to ensure it will never happen again? Why not do something to help?

We may never know the answer to why, but the answers to why not begin with all of us.

Over the years I've received many hundreds of comments in response to my columns, but the thank-you email I got from a Rocori parent in response to this piece remains the most cherished. It was the first time someone told me directly that something I'd written had helped them, a powerful incentive to keep writing.

On other occasions I've had the opportunity to engage an issue with which I have direct experience. In the fall of 2003 a group of citizens appointed by Governor Tim Pawlenty to revise Minnesota's history education standards released its draft report and it was not well received by educators or historians. The group was quite conservative in its approach and the document they released followed the lead of states like Texas in rejecting higher-order thinking in favor of rote memorization, emphasizing objective testing over critical thinking skills, and stipulating a list of patriotic themes and actors be taught instead of the warts-and-all complexity that makes real history compelling. In writing about the controversy I tried to balance a critical professional voice with my own deep concern over the importance of history to informed citizenship and ended up implying the proposal was more of a propaganda project than a rational standard for teaching.

Dateline: *St. Cloud Times*, November 5, 2003

## **Proposed history standards fail**

Minnesota's newly proposed history standards have drawn fire in recent weeks, and rightly so. The draft document is overtly conservative, ignores children's developmental limitations and appears to have been designed more for the ease of testing than for learning.

Sadly, it also reflects a model of history education based on force-feeding students pre-digested lists of facts rather than teaching them to think for themselves.

Critics of the proposed standards — including several members of the committee that drafted them — have pointed out that the list of must-know facts is heavily weighted toward Anglo-European men, narrow lessons in patriotism, and what might charitably be described as trivia. But beyond the failure of the content is the failure to acknowledge historical thinking as a process, a skill to

be developed, and a way of understanding the world that cannot be learned simply by memorizing facts, trivial or otherwise.

Journalism is primarily concerned with facts and traffics primarily in the easy who, what, when and where questions with which we're all familiar. History, by contrast, is about causation: why things happened the way they did and what we can learn from them. While any child can be trained to parrot back a list of facts, teaching skills such as critical thinking, historical analysis, argumentation and historical causation are much bolder goals. Too bold, apparently, for Minnesota's teachers to aspire toward. Too bold to ask of our children.

## **Testing**

One problem with teaching real historical skills is that they are hard to assess with a simple test. In an era of "accountability" determined by performance on standardized, mechanically scored tests, it's virtually impossible to ascertain quickly, easily or cheaply if a student understands something as complex as historical causation.

So instead we go the Texas route and teach the test, asking students to memorize a list of names or dates agreed to by some committee. With enough practice at memorization, the test scores inevitably go up and hey, presto! The schools have improved.

Unfortunately, the students still know little of history and an opportunity to enlighten and inspire them has been lost to the drudgery of textbook exercises and the headlong rush to meet meaningless standards before graduation.

The proposed laundry list of almost 200 specific items that Minnesota high school students must either “know,” “explain” or “discuss” about history is remarkable for its length, but also for what it omits. Nothing in it suggests the committee members even glanced at the National Standards for History, a document crafted after years of research by the National Committee for History in the Schools, a group of historians and teachers working at UCLA.

If they had, they might have noticed those standards are predicated on a set of historical thinking skills that includes chronological thinking, historical comprehension, historical analysis and interpretation, historical research capabilities, and historical issues-analysis and decision-making.

Only later does a laundry list appear, and even then it is shaped around intellectually engaging, active verbs such as “analyze,” “evaluate” and “examine” rather than the easily testable verbs chosen by Minnesota’s committee.

In 1917, as the United States entered the Great War, an organization called the Committee on Public Information was created by executive order of Woodrow Wilson. The first official government propaganda office in the nation’s history, the CPI was charged with mobilizing public opinion in support of the war and of Wilson. Perhaps its most disturbing program was the ironically named National School Service, which produced and distributed lesson plans aimed at making “every school pupil a messenger for Uncle Sam.” Soon children were learning how bad Germans were — and how great Americans were — in virtually every class in school, including history.

## What we can do

By providing a similar service in Minnesota we could likely teach our children to stand in awe and reverence of our state and national accomplishments. We could give them a list of approved facts to memorize, and a test to make sure they complied. But we wouldn't be teaching them history then, would we?

Historians and the public alike should not only give the proposed history standards a failing grade, they should pull out their red pens and scrawl "DO OVER" across the top page. History is simply too important to allow politicians, ideologues or any appointed committee to simply turn it into another element in a prepackaged, mechanically scored, assembly-line educational process aimed at producing nothing more than another generation of blind patriots who are coincidentally good at Trivial Pursuit.

We should hold our leaders, our children, and ourselves to a higher standard. Indeed, history demands it of us.

Interestingly, this piece prompted an invitation to speak on the issue at St. Cloud's Whitney Senior Center. I'd given several talks there over the years, but they were usually on historical topics rather than current events. The group read my column in advance and after some background remarks from me they had a spirited discussion for over an hour. In the end everyone agreed that it was much more desirable to teach young citizens to think critically and to ask questions about history than to simply memorize lists of dates and patriotic stories. Connecting with readers face-to-face can be a real upside of writing for a popular audience — I can count on my fingers the number of times that's happened with my academic writing but I've exchanged emails or talked with hundreds of readers in response to my newspaper columns. Even when we disagree, those exchanges have largely been positive and keep me wanting to write more.

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Positive feedback aside, picking topics for columns can be a challenge. What fits the newspaper definition of “current” and is likely to interest local readers? Do I know enough about the issue to offer an informed opinion? And given my own desire to drive change on some level, is there something I can call on people to do in response? My December columns often have something to do with consumerism, since we are all bombarded by holiday advertising and the commercial culture surrounding Christmas. Rather than chide people for shopping, though, my approach has generally been to try steering readers toward more sustainable purchases. I’ve written about the value of books, handmade toys, and local products as gifts at various times. One of my first holiday columns was about decorations though — specifically the environmental impact of traditional incandescent holiday lights and the emerging alternative of LED illumination. It seemed trivial when I first thought of the topic, but once I did some rough calculations on the impact of holiday lights it seemed anything but.

Dateline: *St. Cloud Times*, December 1, 2004

## **Christmas lights can be Earth-friendly**

*Consider LED bulbs when decorating home to lower energy use*

Few people — other than the likes of Ebenezer Scrooge or the Grinch — dislike Christmas lights.

We celebrate the holidays by flipping the switch on a National Christmas Tree outside the White House, state trees in virtually every Capitol building, city trees, school trees, church trees, and of course light up almost every one of the 35 million Christmas trees bought each year for display in private homes.



## **Energy use**

Who for a moment stops to consider the collective impact of switching on all those Christmas lights?

Do the math: 35 million trees with five 100-light strands each comes to 17.5 billion bulbs. Just on our Christmas trees.

Add to this all the outdoor lights, inflatable Santas, rooftop stars, spot-lit crèches and shiny red Rudolph noses, and the total energy consumed is staggering.

The best guess at the total comes from a federal Department of Energy report released last year. It estimated the total energy use from miniature holiday lights alone to be more than 2.2 terawatt hours per year, or 2,220,000,000 kilowatt hours.

One kilowatt hour is the standard unit for which you are billed by the power company — the use of 1,000 watts for one hour — and costs about eight cents for residential customers in Central Minnesota, including taxes. At current rates, 2.2 terawatt hours would yield an electric bill of \$177 million dollars.

## **Pollutants**

Even more importantly, depending on your local power source, it also would produce substantial amounts of greenhouse gasses, particulate pollutants, mercury, nuclear waste, dead salmon and all the other nasty byproducts of power generation. Merry Polluted Christmas everyone!

We hear almost nothing about this energy use because environmental organizations are loath to play the role of humbug.

For the typical family running a few strands of lights on the tree and a couple more outside each evening in December the direct cost is perhaps \$10 to \$15 added to the January power bill. But taken in aggregate, holiday lighting represents a tremendous energy load that is entirely unnecessary, enough so that some places have considered banning Christmas lights to save power and help eliminate the need to build more generating facilities.

### **The bright side**

But we need not go that far. Happily, Christmas lights are one of those things that have improved over time, and today there are alternatives available that make sense economically as well as environmentally.

The secret? More efficient lights. Decades ago most families trimmed their trees with strands of large C-7 bulbs that burned about five watts each, or 500 watts for five strings of 20 bulbs. Lighting those six hours a night for a month would cost \$7.20 at today's rates.

By the mid-1970s the C-7 bulb was replaced with smaller mini-bulbs commonly packaged in strands of 100. These use about 0.4 watts each or 200 watts for five strings of 100 bulbs; a family with 500 mini-bulbs on the tree will pay about \$2.88 to light them for the same period of time.

And now there's an even better alternative: LED lights that use 0.04 watts per bulb, which brings the tree lighting bill down to 29 cents for the season. LED brands such as Forever Bright are available at retailers on the Web and nationwide, and run about \$10 for a strand of 35. As a bonus, these lights are not just more efficient but are expected to last up to 30 times as long as the mini-bulbs,

which seldom make it beyond two or three seasons. They're more durable and emit less heat, so are safer for your home and family as well. What's not to like?

### **Huge savings**

Americans buy about 160 million sets of holiday lights each year, 78 percent of which are mini-bulbs. If these were replaced by LED bulbs as the older mini-bulbs wore out, within a few years we could be saving about 2 terawatts of electricity each year, enough energy to meet the needs of 2.5 million homes for a month. In the process, we'd also eliminate 90 percent of the pollution generated while powering the old lights.

The potential savings is so significant that power companies in Washington state, British Columbia, and other places are offering rebates on LED lights or even offering coupons for free LED lights in exchange for sets of mini-bulbs.

While the payback in power savings for individuals would be a matter of a few years, the environmental payback is immediate.

So go ahead, light up that tree, string bulbs across the eaves, and spell out a blinking "MERRY XMAS" on the back fence. But do it with LED lights and show the neighbors that caring for the planet can be part of the holiday spirit.

Then, if you really want to make a statement, track down some solar-powered LED lights to showcase the wreath on the front door.

Merry Energy Efficient Christmas everyone!

Many readers responded to that column saying they were going to recycle their incandescent lights after New Year's and go shopping for LEDs. Driving consumption isn't really the best way to reduce environmental impacts, but making people aware of sustainable alternatives can't hurt.

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One major benefit of working in two fields — history and environmental studies in my case — is that I'm constantly being exposed to new information and ideas from both disciplines. I took an interest in the emerging field of "green building" about a dozen years ago, due in part to attending conference presentations about green buildings going up on college campuses around the country. I learned enough about it to teach an environmental studies seminar on sustainable design in 2004, and the following year had cause to write about it when our local school district proposed a levy to build a new school in St. Joseph. Though we lived in St. Cloud at the time, our eldest daughter attended Kennedy Elementary in St. Joe, and if the district was going to replace the outdated and undersized structure I wanted to make sure the new school would be green.

Dateline: *St. Cloud Times*, November 2, 2005

## **Cleaner, greener schools: A top priority**

***Not only will we help the environment and cut costs, but kids' attitudes will improve***

Here's some free advice for the winners of Tuesday's St. Cloud school board election: Adopt a policy requiring all new construction and any substantial remodeling of district schools to be green, or environmentally friendly.

During the past decade public schools have moved to the forefront of the green building movement, led by those who recognize the benefits green building brings in the form of healthier kids, lower operating costs and reduced environmental impacts.

This “green bottom line” has proven so compelling that many districts and even some entire states have mandated that all future school construction be certified under the standards established by the U.S. Green Building Council.

Clearly the most important benefit of green schools is the improvement in indoor air quality achieved by eliminating toxins and providing high-quality climate control and filtration systems.

By replacing items that can release toxic substances — including some paints, carpet, plastics and PVC — with less harmful substitutes, dramatic improvements in air quality can be achieved from the start.

High-tech climate systems also help maintain indoor air quality by controlling humidity, removing mold spores, dust and pollen, and making occupants more comfortable. As we learn more about the causes of asthma, “sick building syndrome” and the problems some schools are having with mold outbreaks, eliminating the negative health impacts of poor air quality should be the No. 1 priority for our classrooms.

Green building can also save taxpayers money through direct savings from lower utility bills.

While each building is unique, it is common for green schools to see a 30 percent reduction in water use and as much as a 40 percent reduction in energy use over traditional buildings of comparable size.

Water consumption can be reduced significantly by employing efficient fixtures, installing gray water recycling systems and avoiding landscaping that requires irrigation.

Similarly, energy costs can be addressed through conservation techniques such as super-insulation, passive solar design, reducing reliance on electric lighting, installing intelligent control systems, and specifying ultra-efficient climate control systems.

A green building might even generate some of its own power through solar panels, wind turbines or co-generators used in applications such as swimming pool heating.

The environmental benefits of green building are clear as well. Obviously using fewer toxic materials and choosing sustainably produced alternatives like certified wood products are environmental pluses.

Reducing energy consumption has a direct impact on the production of greenhouse gasses and — in places that rely on coal for electricity as we do — will also help reduce mercury emissions.

But green building practices also require waste reduction, a recognition of the vast amount of construction debris that is landfilled each year. Green interior design creates markets for new products such as recycled carpet and furniture made from reclaimed fiber or recycled steel.

The positive impacts can be extended to the outdoors by reducing the size of hard surfaces such as roofs and pavement while carefully planning storm water management to protect local wetlands, lands and rivers.

Green landscapes might include native plants that require neither chemical fertilizers nor irrigation.

And every green building will have a carefully planned system to reduce waste and encourage recycling during operation, recognition of the fact that our schools generate almost 4 percent of the nation's municipal waste stream.

A decade ago green building came at a premium, often as high as 10 percent more than conventional designs. That is no longer the case. Several recent studies have concluded that green buildings can be built for as little as 1 percent more. Combined with the certain return from energy savings, green design may now yield a payback in a matter of months, with some recent projects expected to return 20 percent or more of initial costs during the useful life of the school.

If that's not enough to convince skeptics, recent studies from California report positive impacts on student behavior and performance, with test scores improving by as much as 20 percent when classes move from old construction to new green buildings. Striking reductions in absenteeism and behavioral problems are also appearing as positive outcomes of green design.

By adopting a green building standard for a proposed St. Joseph school and all other new construction, the leaders of District 742 could improve the health of our children, reduce the costs of operating our schools and protect the environment. It's a win-win-win situation. So once the elections are done, let's make sure we remind the school board that green is the color of the future.

Much to my delight voters approved the levy. A week later I received a call from the architects hired to design the new school: they had been told it would be "green" and they asked me to serve on the committee charged with making the project sustainable. Over the year that followed I worked closely with the architects and engineers on the project, largely in the role

of researching school design approaches, finding studies of various alternative systems, and looking for performance assessments of green schools in other states. The new Kennedy Community School opened in the fall of 2008, complete with a wind turbine, solar panels, geothermal heating/cooling, and a design that used daylight in every regularly occupied interior space. The school was recognized by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency as one of the greenest in the nation in 2012. Over the years I've heard the lead architect and the school principal repeatedly say the green design came in response to demands from the community, and I like to think my column helped inform some of that debate.

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Though during the Bush Administration I often found myself wanting to write about national issues, the *Times* of course wanted opinions on local matters for the paper. After all, they had already paid for George Will's column, so what more could I add? On occasion I still rose to the bait and looked for a local connection that would give me license to opine on what I saw as an increasingly disturbing trend toward authoritarianism, jingoistic nationalism, and intellectual dishonesty emanating from Washington. When the White House started using the term "Islamofascist" broadly in 2006, I made a connection to an old local-boy-done-good, Sinclair Lewis, to offer a warning about language and meaning I hoped would not be lost on local residents who might never have read *Main Street* or visited the literary museum in Sauk Centre, but could still be convinced that it really was happening here.

Dateline: *St. Cloud Times*, October 4, 2006

### **'Fascism' reflects familiar theme**

The term "fascist" is back in vogue after long hiatus, rescued from the oblivion of history by the Bush administration.

Rather than fighting an ill-defined "war on terror" we are now up against "Islamofascists," a threat the president would like to equate with the fascist states we fought in World War II.



This is a politically powerful tactic aimed at maintaining the perception that no crisis we face today is nearly as important as the war on terrorism; everything else we do must either stem from it directly or play second fiddle. Education, health care, energy costs, Social Security reform, the environment — nothing about these merits much attention during a war against a global fascist threat.

Certainly we should hunt down and eliminate al-Qaida and anyone else responsible for the terrorist attacks on the United States and other innocents. But instead of fighting a war against a nebulous Islamofascist opponent, we should be working to address the conditions that breed terrorists and anti-American sentiment. Instead of fighting a war against something we cannot even define clearly, we should be working militarily, diplomatically, economically and socially to spread our core values around the world.

### **A page from fiction**

During the Great Depression, Sauk Centre native Sinclair Lewis penned his last great novel, *It Can't Happen Here*, as a warning about what might happen if Americans forgot their core values.

Fascism was on the rise in Europe, and in the minds of many, the struggles of the Depression had undermined the promise of American democracy as well. In Lewis's fictional dystopia, a homespun regular-guy sort of president who campaigned against social ills slowly capitalized on public fears to become a dictator backed by secret police, political prisons, rigid censorship, and a media empire ruled by a radio preacher.

The final step in his agenda was to amend the Constitution to revoke the authority of Congress and the courts over the president, who, being all-knowing, should of course also be all-powerful. It certainly could happen here, Lewis argued; we were no more immune to fascism than the Europeans.

### **More than a story**

Today the war on terrorism has become a political tool used by both parties to scare voters into supporting candidates. The president has been tacitly granted broad new powers, and Congress has almost completely relinquished its oversight role. American citizens have given up personal freedoms without complaint. And now intelligence experts tell us our anti-terrorist tactics are actually breeding more terrorists.

Polls show the public has to a substantial degree lost confidence in our leadership, economy, culture and our future, much as was the case when Lewis wrote *It Can't Happen Here* back in 1935.

Lewis worried that Americans might betray their core values out of fear, taking comfort in having clear enemies and a strong leader to oppose them. In his novel, the fascist president first rose to power by defeating FDR at the 1936 Democratic convention.

But history remembers Roosevelt best for explaining what we were fighting for in the long struggle against fascism, the so-called “Four Freedoms.” Freedom of expression, freedom of religion, freedom from want and freedom from fear were the core values of the United States, the ones people believed worth fighting for back then. Instead of an unending war against an ill-defined and elusive enemy, we should be fighting a positive battle for these core values today as well.

Recently, bumper stickers displaying a quote attributed to Lewis have been popping up around the country. They read: “When fascism comes to America it will be wrapped in the flag and carrying a cross.” We aren’t there yet, but each additional erosion of our core values should bring us closer to realizing that Lewis’s warning isn’t quite yet out of date.

While the column on fascism didn’t draw quite the reaction I’d hoped, a much more innocuous piece three months later stirred things up more than I expected. Since my columns run on the first Wednesday of the month they sometimes align with holidays that offer convenient topical connections.

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In 2007 January 1st was a Wednesday, offering the opportunity to make some New Year’s resolutions in public. I offered readers some consumer advice to make their homes more sustainable, basic things that I’d assumed many households were already doing. Perhaps with a bit of information these practices — none of which were costly, controversial, or really even inconvenient — could be spread.

Dateline: *St. Cloud Times*, January 3, 2007

## **7 resolutions to help environment**

As 2007 dawns, predictions for the environment are grim: climate change, dying oceans, energy shortages, genetically engineered Frankenstein foods, even wars over clean drinking water are forecast for the near future.

The flood of bad news on such major issues can be overwhelming, leading to despair and inaction.

But there are many things we can do to improve the environment simply by becoming environmentally conscious consumers. They won’t stop climate change or guarantee a safe food supply on their own, but new habits spreading from neighbor to neighbor can have substantial positive impact.

To that end, here are seven simple resolutions consumers can make to improve the environment (and save themselves money) in 2007.

In 2007, I resolve to:

1. Stop buying antibacterial soaps. Studies have shown they do not improve health or sanitation in the home and can lead to hand eczema for some users. Save your money and the environment by avoiding products containing antibacterial compounds such as triclosan or triclocarban, which also may contribute to the development of drug-resistant “superbacteria” as they kill off less resilient strains when used unnecessarily.’
2. Stop buying nonrecycled paper products. Americans consume 660 pounds of paper per capita each year, much of which comes from clear-cut boreal forests in Canada. Try using less overall, but when you do need paper products, look for brands containing high levels of post-consumer waste. The best contain 100 percent post-consumer content products, but even the minimum EPA recommended 30 percent is available in office paper and most household paper products.
3. Stop buying bottled water. Americans often pay more per gallon for bottled water than for gasoline and as much as 10,000 times the cost of tap water. But how many know that many of their favorite brands are just filtered tap water? One-third of samples in a recent study of 103 brands found levels of contamination in bottled water (loosely regulated by the FDA) that would not be allowed in tap water, which is tightly regulated by the EPA.

4. Stop buying products in excessive packaging. Remember the many holiday gifts that came in a triple-sealed plastic womb? If you must buy such an item, leave the packaging at the checkout counter as a signal to the store to find more eco-friendly suppliers. Another reason to forego bottled water: Annual global consumption of more than 160 billion liters produces a mountain of unnecessary plastic waste that was derived largely from scarce oil.
5. Start buying new furnace filters. A dirty filter can reduce blower efficiency on your furnace by as much as 15 percent. If your furnace uses disposable paper filters, replace them at the start of each season, or more frequently if you have pets or other air quality issues. If you have permanent filters (metal or plastic frames), clean them monthly. Either will improve indoor air quality and save energy, which also reduces emissions of mercury and carbon dioxide from coal-fired power plants.
6. Start buying compact fluorescent light bulbs. Most U.S. households use inefficient incandescent lamps. Improved technology and lower prices make switching to CFS an easy step toward saving about \$55 over the life of each bulb by reducing electric consumption as much as 75 percent while extending life up to eight years.
7. Start buying locally produced foods. An Iowa study found the average distance locally grown food traveled to market was 56 miles; the average for nonlocal foods was 1,494. The costs of transporting food grown elsewhere to Minnesota are only partly reflected in price and quality. The environmental impact of the wasted energy and associated pollution falls on all of us. Ask your produce manager to display points of origin for all products. Buy accordingly.

Resolve to take these seven simple steps toward a better environment in 2007 and help lead consumers in our community down a more sustainable path. It's easy, it will save you money, and it's the right thing to do.

When the column ran I not only learned incandescent bulbs still had their defenders, but that a non-trivial number of area residents felt it important to live as unsustainably as possible as some sort of political statement. Several emailed me to note they would carefully do the opposite of everything I suggested. But the best reaction came from talk radio when Twin Cities libertarian-conservative radio host Joe Soucheray decided to mock the entire column on his Garage Logic show. He declared "sustainability" the weasel-word of the day and, as he read the column over the air, a staff member sounded a horn every time the word came up. I'd reached the big time!

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Owning the first Wednesday of the month has also offered the opportunity to be on the opinion page the day after every November election. Though the Monday deadline means I never know what the outcome of the election will be when the column is being written, I've almost always chosen some link to the elections for my November columns. In the fall of 2007 there were few major issues or candidates on the ballot, but we did have operating levies for local schools going before the voters. Whatever the result of the ballot, I decided, the day after the election would be a good time to talk about the continued absurdity of using our children as unpaid labor in an effort to fund school programming.

Dateline: *St. Cloud Times*, November 7, 2007

## **Support schools, not companies**

If the overnight election results bring good news, voters in most Central Minnesota school districts will have approved new operating levies to keep the doors open a few more years. But whatever the citizens decided, we can

food, Chinese-made trinkets, magazines, and overpriced giftwrap all year to fund extracurricular activities.

Parents will repeatedly buy just one more carton of candy bars, grandparents will pony up for yet another year of *Reader's Digest*, and the neighbors will no doubt buy at least one carton of frozen cookie dough again this fall. But will anyone stop to ask if it's a good idea to turn our kids into a massive, unpaid sales force for the multi-billion dollar school fundraising industry?

According to the Association of Fund-Raising Distributors and Suppliers, an industry organization that exists to "serve" the school fundraising market, these drives netted \$1.7 billion for American schools in 2005, a far cry from the first Girl Scout cookie sale back in 1917.

But how much was earned by association members? The only clear answer is "more than the kids got," as schools typically receive only 40 to 50 cents for every dollar sold and these privately owned companies do not publish their earnings.

It's a brilliant scheme certainly. What other industry can rely on a free sales force and a customer base (family members) that generally feels compelled to purchase their products no matter how useless or unhealthy they might be?

We can't blame the industry for taking advantage of this golden opportunity, but perhaps we should blame schools, parents and the PTA for allowing it to continue.

Nobody seems to doubt the American system of education funding is broken. Though it works better in Minnesota than in many other states, we still send kids of all ages

packing home those boxes of candy in an attempt to earn token prizes for themselves and raise that extra \$5,000 a year to keep their favorite activities going.

But at what cost? Children go to school to learn academic skills, not sales techniques. Teachers are trained to teach, not to manage a sales force. How much time is wasted coordinating and participating in these sales that could be better spent learning? Or simply having fun? Are we really so poor as a society that we must rely on our children to earn the pittances devoted to activities that a generation or two ago were simply considered part of running a school system?

In cases where the need just can't be met within the operating budget there are options besides junk sales to close the gap.

Grants and donations solicited by adults, rather than children, would be the logical first step. Or families can be asked for direct contributions, which can often be cheaper than buying things they don't need from catalogs of stuff they don't want anyway.

If something must be sold, why not have the kids make it? An art show and sale would be more fun for everyone involved than selling beef sticks. Or the band and choir could auction off a private concert, conducting rights or the dedications for a future performance. An English class could write poems on demand, and sell them via the Internet. Even an old-fashioned car wash would allow the kids to keep 100 percent of what they earned, and at the very least they'd be outside having fun.

So the next time your school is running a fundraiser write a check for \$20 to the school rather than one for \$40 to the



candy company. Send it in with a note telling the principal that while you're happy to support the school you'd rather not have your children become part of the fundraising industry's unpaid work force.

Then join the PTA with your friends and see if you can't come up with an alternative that's better for the kids, which is, of course, the reason this all got started.

The column generated many positive comments from parents who apparently shared my frustration at their kids being asked to sell high-priced junk to keep their schools operating. The response from local school officials was less supportive, since they obviously depended on the related revenue to support programming. But logic won out in the end: in the spring of 2012 at least our local school decided to skip the sales altogether and simply asked for donations. To my delight they ended up raising far more than they'd targeted and well beyond what the previous years' sales program had as well.

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My interest in local school issues stems from being a parent as well as an educator. When I started writing my column in 2003 our first daughter was still in diapers. By 2008 we'd had a second girl and both had grown to the point that we were talking about politics around the dinner table, at least trying to explain to them what the signs on the lawn were for and why Mom and Dad wanted to vote for one candidate rather than the other. November 2008 brought another Wednesday-after-the-election column, only this time the election seemed much more significant. The column I wrote for that day was a distinct departure from my typical style, written in the first person singular and addressed not to the readership of the *St. Cloud Times*, but to my two young daughters. I planned to save copies of the paper for each of them, not because my column was in it, but because I felt the historic election was something they'd someday study in school and it would be fun to have an old newspaper reporting the results to show their friends. When the election was called late Tuesday night I knew they'd have even more reason to hang on to those papers — history was being made right before us.

Dateline: *St. Cloud Times*, November 5, 2008

## **I have hopes for future elections**

An open letter to my children:

Girls, I'm saving copies of today's newspaper for each of you, knowing that whatever the outcome of the presidential election it will be historic. They will go into the box with the papers from your birthdays and other important events to be passed to you when you're old enough to want them.

Though several more elections will pass before you can vote yourselves, I trust you'll someday be interested in these mementos of either the first African-American elected to the presidency or the first woman elected to the vice presidency. And who knows? It's always possible that our country may be entering a new era of peace and prosperity and someday you can show the headlines to your friends and say "I remember 2008 ..."

In some ways, though, I'm glad you're not old enough to have paid serious attention to the campaigns that ended Monday. Though inspiring words were sometimes voiced and grand visions occasionally advanced, much of the rhetoric has been vapid and shallow. The politics have been mean spirited and the media coverage sadly juvenile.

Even as Election Day approached voters likely knew more about the female candidates' clothes than their positions on major issues, and certainly more about the male candidates' distant acquaintances and "youthful indiscretions" than their concrete plans for the future. In a polarized environment both campaigns ran for the middle and for the ever-elusive "low information voters" who couldn't be bothered to make up their minds until the last minute. It was not an inspiring process.

My hope is that by the time you are of voting age we will have moved on. Moved on from the partisan rancor — and outright meanness — that has marked our politics for the past several decades. Moved on from the politics of division, an approach that relies as much on suppressing votes as turning them out, and toward an era in which candidates are judged by their platforms and positions, rather than by their opponent's efforts to define them through innuendo and third-party slanders.

Moreover, I hope we will have moved on into an era of new possibilities, where the tired old epithets of “communist” and “socialist” have finally withered as they've long deserved, and where progressive ideas and ideals are more than simply things we remember from history lessons or admire longingly overseas.

Pendulums swing. Ours has been so far to the right for so long that many have despaired its return to a vibrant center. Perhaps the return swing picked up some new momentum Tuesday.

I hope the time has indeed arrived and that you will come of age in a world different from that in which you were born. One in which the United States is respected as a world leader. One in which the basic needs of all Americans are met before the whims of the wealthy and powerful are indulged. One that is led by elected officials you can trust to consider the nation's interest before their own. And one in which anyone can run for office and have a fair shot at winning based on their ideas and accomplishments, not one where political power is reserved for those with personal fortunes, the right connections, or the greatest skill at appealing to voters' fear and ignorance.

I'll look forward to hearing what you think about this, looking back from the days you cast your first votes.

It's entirely possible that by the time you open the box to flip through this yellowed souvenir, newspapers will have themselves become a curiosity. But I trust politics and elections will not. There are signs that 2008 may be the start of a political renaissance, with voters turning out in record numbers to move the country in a new, positive direction. Here's hoping we've started a trend that continues with your generation and moves toward a future filled with all the hard work and opportunities that are your birthrights as Americans.

I already know you to be smart, caring and thoughtful individuals. There are almost unlimited numbers of other people like you out there, waiting to make a difference. I trust you'll always remember that the most important steps in that direction are to educate yourselves on the issues of the day, become informed on the candidates' positions, get involved as volunteers, and to exercise your right to vote just as you watched your mom and I do once again Tuesday.

In retrospect, of course, we know things didn't turn out quite like many of us hoped that Wednesday morning in 2008. But the sentiment was sincere and I still think the old papers will hold their interest whenever they get around to opening the box in the basement.

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Over the run of my column the *St. Cloud Times* has provided a variety of online fora intended to promote discussion of their content. The opinion pieces written by members of the local community often generated the most heated and prolific responses, especially during the years in which comments were effectively anonymous and unmoderated. After reading these for some time one could start to identify certain characters and predict their reactions to a wide range of positions and issues. Political

and social issues of course drew the most comments and I must admit that at times I had some of these readers in mind when writing a column. When the Iowa Supreme Court effectively ended that state's ban on gay marriage in 2009, I thought I'd provoke a few of these anonymous readers by offering a pragmatic solution to the marriage debate and also striking a blow for the separation of church and state. Arguing from a position of dispassionate logic, rather than emotion, struck me as more likely to sway some readers to my ultimate position: that personal religious values should have no impact on the rights of others to marry.

Dateline: *St. Cloud Times*, June 3, 2009

### **There's a solution to this problem**

When the Iowa Supreme Court upheld a lower-court ruling throwing out that state's ban on same-sex marriage in April, folks from Maine to Oregon suddenly took notice of our sister state.

The California state Supreme Court's decision not to overturn a similar ban last week only served to fan the flames over this divisive issue. Nearly 50 bills or constitutional amendments involving same-sex marriage are being debated around the country this year.

But, the solution to the entire problem is actually fairly simple: get government out of the marriage business and bar churches from any role in determining people's status outside their faith communities.

There is no compelling reason for government to be involved with the institution of marriage. It should not be regulated, taxed, recorded, or in any other way intertwined with any public agency. Faith communities must be allowed to define marriage in keeping with their own traditions and the needs of their congregants. If a particular church proclaims it will

be it. Whatever standards are set by a particular group of believers will apply only to them and have no bearing on anyone who is not a member of their church. Thus faith and marriage remain personal choices, “the sanctity of marriage” can be protected by and for those who feel it is somehow threatened, and the rights of one group to define marriage as they see fit will not impede the rights of others who view the institution differently.

Rather than playing a role in marriage, local, state, and federal governments should simply be in the business of recording domestic partnerships. Registered domestic partners would hold a common tax status, own property jointly, enjoy shared custody of their children, be covered under one another’s health insurance policies, have hospital visitation rights, be liable under alimony laws if the partnership is dissolved, and generally be treated as legally married couples are today. Everyone in a registered partnership would be treated equally under the law and domestic partnership would apply to everyone; currently married couples would have to register their partnerships just as the newly “partnered” would in the future. There would be no restrictions on who could enter into a domestic partnership other than basic standards for a minimum age and a reasonable degree of familial separation. The gender, race, religion, and even state of residence of the partners would be irrelevant.

Social change is hard to predict and harder to legislate. By separating marriage — a religious issue — from domestic partnership — a civil issue — we would short-circuit much of the heated rhetoric in the debates over same-sex marriage. Most importantly though, we would ensure equal treatment to all our citizens because the outcomes of the religious debates would no longer dictate

whose relationships held legal status, whose rights ended at the hospital door, which couples were able to adopt, or who in the household was eligible for medical coverage. Religious marriage would continue to be an option for those who wanted it and whose faith communities offered it, but everyone who wanted to join their lives together could engage in a domestic partnership.

Laws prohibiting same-sex marriage are likely to fall in the coming years regardless of what we do today, quite possibly in one fell swoop at the hand of the U.S. Supreme Court. Citing the equal protection clause in striking down existing bans on interracial marriage in 1967, the court noted that “Under our Constitution, the freedom to marry, or not marry, a person of another race resides with the individual and cannot be infringed by the State.” It is not much of a leap to see the same logic applied to gender. The question is really how long it will take. Rather than draw the issue out over many years, creating a confusing and uneven patchwork of discriminatory state laws, wouldn’t it be wiser to simply settle it now in a way that reflects our country’s highest traditions of freedom of choice, individual responsibility, and equality for all?

And after all, as any Californian can tell you, once something’s been decided in Iowa it’s probably well past time we moved on to the next big concern anyway.

Somewhat to my surprise, I ended up in more personal conversations about this column than most others, the vast majority with people who accepted my position. One acquaintance whom I knew to oppose gay marriage told me outright that I’d changed his mind on the issue, which I felt more than justified the time that went into writing the column.

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Despite this occasional desire to court controversy, one of the topics I've generally avoided writing about has been higher education. I've never wanted my columns to be associated directly with my place of work, and given the readership of the paper have long assumed that audience interest in the world of the private liberal arts college was limited. But the dramatic and easily observable shift in the role of parents in higher education over the last two decades offered a link between my professional experiences and the interests of parents in the community. Following a series of stories in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* that produced some frankly shocking examples of what I considered parental overreach, I composed a back-to-school column in 2009 that asked directly if parents might not be harming their students by holding their hands all the way through college.

Dateline: *St. Cloud Times*, September 2, 2009

## **Parents, let students go, grow**

As new college students settle into residence halls and begin their first classes, many faculty and staff who work with them are wondering “how long before the first parent calls?”

For some academics the most striking change between this generation of students and the one before is not their ability to navigate the digital world, their growing diversity, or their politics, but the extent to which their parents are involved in their daily lives.

Much has been written about “helicopter parents” in recent years. Few would argue that having parents involved in their adult offsprings’ lives is a bad thing. But it can go too far. Everyone in higher education has heard stories about parents calling the dean to demand a new roommate at the first sign of conflict, calling the department chair to



to complain about an “unfair” exam when a grade is lower than expected, or even calling their student directly each morning as a sort of wake-up service.

At the extremes these parental behaviors prevent students from taking responsibility for their actions, slow their progress into adulthood, and waste time and resources better spent on education.

In a world where grocery carts come with sanitizing wipes, “teen” sleepovers are viewed as risky, and many children never go outside without a parent this level of engagement may not be surprising. But how far is too far?

One study found 31 percent of students had a parent call a professor to complain about a grade and 38 percent had parents attend meetings with their academic advisers. While students generally value their parents’ advice — 65 percent in this poll — fully 25 percent reported their parents’ behavior “was either annoying or embarrassing.”

Annoying parents are a universal reality among teens, but at least it used to stop by the time they left for college. No longer though. Even graduate schools are reporting unforeseen levels of parental “involvement” and are having to develop policies to manage them.

A parent’s responsibility to a child changes with time. Surely everyone recognizes that the close monitoring appropriate to a toddler is unnecessary for a teen and likely detrimental to a teenager. Children need the freedom to make choices, experience life, and learn from their own successes and failures.

College used to be the line of demarcation between childhood and adulthood, to one side of which parents rarely strayed, coming to campus for move-in, graduation, and perhaps a

concert or sporting event in between. But today's parents are not only physically on campus much more, they are connected with their students by cell phone and email at any whim. A Boston Globe report last spring noted one parent admitting to 144 phone calls with her daughter in a single month!

Rather than giving in to overinvolved parents, some colleges are trying to educate families on how best to negotiate the transition to adulthood. Orientation sessions for new students and their parents may specifically address the issue. Parents are asked to let their students make their own choices and accept (and learn from) the consequences. Faculty and staff are encouraged to ask parents to send their students to meetings rather than call in their place. More information than ever is being provided to families, who can now keep track of their students' grades, charge accounts, class schedule, and disciplinary records — sometimes even online.

The hope is to inform parents and to foster communication within families, so minor problems on campus don't escalate to major ones in a flood of texts, voice messages and emails that culminate in a frantic call to the dean by a parent who may have only heard one side of the story.

The solution to this problem is not to silence or exclude parents. Instead, we as a society should encourage young adults to accept greater responsibility. College students should choose their own majors, pick their own classes, settle conflicts with their roommates, and question their professors directly.

If we collectively decide to extend childhood into the 20s, where do we stop? Will parents start attending job interviews with their college graduates? Negotiating prenups for their 30-somethings?

There is no doubt that having parents involved in their adult children's lives is a good thing. But both parties need to make wise decisions about where and when to draw the line.

As in this case, one strategy I employed with almost every column was using data to support my arguments. So many letters to the editor are devoid of facts, being literally based on opinion or faith, that I wanted to offer more substance in my columns from the outset. While I could cite “a recent study” there was rarely space for a full citation or a link to a web page. I've long wished there was space for footnotes in the newspaper, if only so I could share more sources more directly with readers to better support my arguments.

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These space restrictions apply to quotations as well. In the fall of 2010, just as the Minnesota gubernatorial race was heating up, my interest was drawn to a sudden controversy linking the Target corporation to an organization supporting conservative Republican candidate Tom Emmer. I had written about the *Citizens United* case previously and Target's embarrassing misstep — which led to a national boycott by LGBT groups and their supporters — helped drive home the point I'd made previously: while it was perfectly legal for businesses to take political positions on divisive issues, they should not be surprised when some of their customers take offense. Because this story was playing out largely in social media like Facebook and Twitter there were many great quotes available online. Space made it hard to use them all though, and since they often couldn't be verified I chose to use the historical example of a 19th century mercantile run by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints as an example of what socially or religiously branded marketing could become.

Dateline: *St. Cloud Times*, August 4, 2010

## **Can businesses afford politics?**

Heads were scratched nationwide last week when public records revealed both Target and Best Buy had made \$100,000 donations to a political organization called

MN Forward. Its major activity to date has been funding ads in support of Republican gubernatorial candidate Tom Emmer, a staunch social conservative who has been endorsed by Sarah Palin.

This was perfectly legal since the U.S. Supreme Court's ruling in the Citizens United case eliminated most restrictions on corporate donations to political organizations. With legal rights to free speech akin to individuals, corporations can use their resources to support any candidate or cause they see fit — but that doesn't mean doing so is always good for business.

Target in particular has come under fire for its donation because Emmer's conservative social positions are not shared by all of its customers. The company has a reputation as being pro-GLBT, in part because it offers health benefits to domestic partners. But Emmer has spoken strongly against marriage equality and even embraced a controversial Christian singer widely criticized for stating that Muslim countries that put homosexuals to death are "more moral than even the American Christians."

A backlash against the donation to MN Forward started on social networks and blogs. In less than a week, a new Facebook group called "Boycott Target Until They Cease Funding Anti-Gay Politics" gained more than 27,000 members, and virtually every story related to Target now refers to the flap.

This raises two basic questions: Is the political value of supporting a controversial candidate or organization worth negative publicity? And will consumers care enough to change their shopping habits if they disagree with a corporation's choice of causes?

A Target representative explained that “our support of causes and candidates is based strictly on issues that affect our retail and business objectives” while CEO Greg Steinhafel told critics “Target’s support of the GLBT community is unwavering, and inclusiveness remains a core value of our company.”

Consumers may not be as willing to separate economic policy from social positions.

In this case, consumers did take notice when Target engaged in political spending perceived as contrary to their values. Small-scale boycotts and storefront protests of Target have been organized. Target’s official Facebook page has been flooded with protests, and complaints have poured in to the Human Rights Campaign, a pro-GLBT organization that had given Target good marks.

Time will tell if this is simply short-term outrage or if consumers will really change their shopping habits.

But what if all our shopping choices became politicized? Will we carry a list of stores that share our political values? Will consumers pledge loyalty to a single store not due to “low, low prices” but for political, cultural, or religious reasons?

Among the first department stores in the United States was the Zion’s Cooperative Mercantile Institution, formed by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints in 1868. The “ZCMI” department stores didn’t sell exclusively to Mormon customers, but for many Mormons the ZCMI was the only proper place to shop for more than 130 years, until it became part of Macy’s in 1999.

Was Brigham Young ahead of his time in believing consumers should spend their money at stores that shared their values?

While surveys show most Americans base their retail choices on pocketbook issues, our polarized political climate may challenge that. In the future, we may shop at liberal or conservative stores, eat at progressive or conservative restaurants, and hire plumbers or mechanics who are affiliated with our own political parties.

Until that happens, any business directly or indirectly taking a political position on a divisive issue runs the risk of alienating customers. Meanwhile, boards and shareholders may want to ask if the potential political gain of exercising this “free speech” is indeed worth the cost.

Though I took inspiration for the Target column from Facebook posts, a few months later I used Facebook as a foil in an argument about rethinking how our society values work and prioritizes education.

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I’d been wanting to write something about the importance of skilled manual labor — of making *things* — for some time. The news that Facebook had been valued at \$50 billion by financial analysts projecting an IPO gave me the perfect opportunity to make the case for rethinking our definitions of productivity and the priorities of our educational system.

Dateline: *St. Cloud Times*, January 5, 2011

## **What do we do now? Facebook**

Monday’s financial headlines were dominated by Goldman Sachs’ \$500 million investment in Facebook, raising the value of the privately owned Internet social media company to an estimated \$50 billion.

All those connections between high school classmates, former colleagues, and people who share an interest in online farm simulations are apparently worth more than anyone could have imagined when Facebook began as an undergraduate's side project at Harvard in 2003.

With more than 500 million users worldwide, Facebook's value now exceeds that of US Bank, Ford, Target, Monsanto or Visa. When Facebook goes public, as many assume it will in the next year, its market capitalization could exceed that of Boeing, Home Depot, Kraft, or 3M, placing it within striking distance of Disney and McDonald's among America's largest corporations.

And Facebook doesn't make a thing.

Fifty years ago, the largest corporations all made stuff. In 1961, the top 20 slots in the Fortune 500 were held by oil/chemical companies, automobile manufacturers, defense contractors, steel producers, and food processors. Only one media company — CBS — was even in the top 100.

In 1961, 38 percent of American workers were producing something tangible: cars, steel, appliances, houses, oil, airplanes, bombs, etc. Today that number has fallen to 21 percent; about one in five of us actually makes something for a living now. The rest of us? Apparently we're on Facebook.

This raises some basic questions about the future of our economy and the middle class.

The post-war American economic boom was based on the production of goods consumed domestically, relatively high wages in the manufacturing sector, and public investment in education and infrastructure. The GI Bill,

expansion of public universities, and increased spending on K-12 education helped lift veterans and their children into the middle class, while those who did not pursue higher education could still get there by holding a union job. Still more families climbed into the middle class by sending mom into the work force, a shift that conveyed great advantages for the first generation to do so — but much less on subsequent generations when dual incomes became the status quo.

Today a \$50 billion company makes no products at all, but rather supplies a virtual space in which people chatter, share pictures, and play games. Facebook employs a few thousand people, has no factories, no warehouses, no distribution centers, no retail arm, and no maintenance shops. Its founder did not graduate from college but was a billionaire before the age of 25.

Of course, this is all legal and proper; Facebook would not have 500 million users if people didn't want its services.

What is wrong with the bigger picture is lack of counterbalancing stories for Facebook. When was the last time you read about a hugely profitable new product — an actual manufactured good — invented by, developed in, produced by, and sold to Americans that wasn't a drug? What was the last new industry that employed thousands of Americans at wages that would ensure a place in the middle class? When was the last massive public investment in our collective future, or that of our children?

America has long been in a state of slow decline. We have become a nation of consumers, rather than producers. Incomes have stagnated, and income inequality is



growing. The middle class is eroding under a mountain of debt and fears that unemployment or illness could end their American dream.

We have stopped investing in schools, instead choosing to “train” children and young adults in skills that aren’t needed for careers that may not exist when they enter the job market. Few, if any, of our elected leaders appear to think beyond the next election cycle, and horizons beyond the next quarter don’t matter to Wall Street. Today’s children may well be the first generation in American history to collectively end up worse off than their parents when they reach middle age.

That, more than the \$50 billion valuation of Facebook, should be dominating the headlines as we enter 2011.

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As one of a relatively few liberal voices on the *Times* editorial page I sometimes write columns that are thinly veiled responses to other columnists or letter writers. When a series of contributors repeatedly emphasize a position with which I disagree, I occasionally rise to the bait and try to offer an alternative perspective. I’ve found issues of class particularly difficult to navigate because the vast majority of Americans consider themselves to be middle class and seem to assume their experiences are normative. As talk of the looming election grew in 2011 I was particularly upset by the constant appeals and references to the “middle class” by people who were clearly unfamiliar with the lives of what objectively might be defined as the *real* middle class, that is, those clustered around the middle quintile of income distribution in the United States. As the campaigns heated up in early 2012 I decided to remind readers what the difference between “rich” and “middle class” actually meant while pointing out just how far outside the mainstream the experiences of the candidates from both parties had become.

Dateline: *St. Cloud Times*, February 1, 2012

## **Wealth fuels political disconnect**

Thanks to the GOP presidential primary, income inequality has received more attention in recent weeks than since the Occupy movement first took Zuccotti Park.

In early January, Mitt Romney made news by dismissing concerns over inequality, stating, “You know, I think it’s about envy. I think it’s about class warfare.” Newt Gingrich later denied any difference between the haves and have-nots, proclaiming that “There is no such thing in America as the 99 percent!” And just on Friday, President Obama staked out his position, telling lawmakers that “Nobody envies rich people, everybody wants to be rich!”

What Romney, Gingrich, and Obama seem to miss is the degree to which average folks are appalled by the attitudes exhibited by those who inhabit the upper bound of the income scale.

When Romney casually offered Rick Perry a \$10,000 bet during a GOP debate, it’s clear he wasn’t thinking, “Hey, 9.1 million American households live on less than that per year!” When he later dismissed the \$360,000 he earned giving speeches last year as “not very much,” many of us thought, “Wow, that’s more than me and all my neighbors made put together!” Reactions to Gingrich’s half-million dollar jewelry tab at Tiffany’s were similar. Even the Obama family’s \$1.7 million in reported income for 2010 is beyond the grasp of most Americans. These politicians are so disconnected from reality that what they consider “rich” is solidly in “lottery winner” territory for the rest of us.

## **So, what is ‘rich’?**

As it turns out, what counts as “rich” varies a lot from person to person. But the vast majority of us believe it’s much less than the \$362,000 Romney earned giving speeches last year. A Gallup poll conducted in December offers useful perspective. Fully 30 percent of respondents set the bar at \$100,000 for annual income; anything more they felt was “rich.” An additional 23 percent pegged it between \$100,000 and \$150,000, so the majority — 53 percent — believe earning \$150,000 per year makes one rich.

In that context, Obama is probably correct. Most Americans likely would want to be rich, at least by this definition. More importantly, it’s within the realm of imagination. Most of us know someone whose income likely falls into this category, if only through our association with a doctor, lawyer, banker, or other professional. One of every 20 households in outstate Minnesota earns \$150,000 or more per year, so some of our neighbors no doubt qualify. This isn’t lottery rich, but rather “things worked out well for us” rich. It could happen to you, right?

## **Tough bar to clear**

The problem is that even this modest definition of rich is beyond the reach of the vast majority of Americans.

Today the median household earns about \$52,000 per year. They’d need to triple that to clear the \$150,000 bar, impossible for most families even in a strong economy. Because half of all households earn less than the median and fully 16 million households earn less than \$15,000 per year, it’s apparent we’ll never all be even modestly

rich. For the most part, folks accept that. That's why the American dream was never really "being rich," but owning one's home, having a job and a car, taking a vacation every summer, and raising your kids to have a better life than you did. These were modest goals seen as achievable with hard work, at least for the majority of us.

### **Not today's reality**

But things have changed. While the ultra-wealthy can buy politicians through unlimited campaign donations, more than 45 million of us are relying on government assistance to keep food on the table. Almost 14 million Americans are out of work. About 21 percent of our children are being raised in poverty. Three-quarters of a million Americans are homeless.

For too many of us rich simply means having food, shelter, clothing, and a job to go to each day. For most it still means having a shot at that modest American dream. So before our political leaders take on the problems vexing the very rich they should probably find time to learn about the problems of, as someone wise once said, "the least among us." Then maybe they'd start to understand why "real Americans" are talking about income inequality once again.

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The socially conservative rhetoric of the 2012 Republican presidential primary was a constant source of stimulating exchanges around town and in the paper as well. Having regular access to the opinion page of a newspaper has its advantages, not the least of which is the opportunity to blow off some steam when public figures are proposing policies or promoting ideas that strike one as departures from rational thought. The GOP debates offered something of a reality TV version of Extreme Politics that spring, and when candidates began trying to outdo one another in proposing new restrictions on birth control I felt I had to engage.

Dateline: *St. Cloud Times*, April 4, 2012

## **Birth control access is vital**

The idea that birth control would become a key issue in the GOP primary race would have seemed preposterous last summer, but Rick Santorum's unexpected rise to become the last obstacle in Mitt Romney's preordained path to the nomination changed everything this winter.

Now, thanks largely to the arch-conservative from Pennsylvania, a debate that was effectively ended by the Supreme Court a half-century ago has been reopened, and again Americans are arguing about whether women should have access to birth control.

Birth control was a controversial topic in the 19th century, and several states had banned the sale of birth control devices and medications by 1900.

These laws were collectively struck down with the Supreme Court's 1965 decision in *Griswold v. Connecticut*, which found an 1879 state law prohibiting the use of birth control and banning doctors from discussing the issue with their patients to be unconstitutional.

Writing for the 7-2 majority, Justice William O. Douglas identified a "right to privacy" in the Constitution that invalidated Connecticut's attempt to legislate morality.

Santorum disagrees, however, claiming the court erred and claiming "the state has the right to pass whatever statues" it wishes.

Legal arguments aside, the truth is that Santorum's campaign against birth control is as quixotic as his run

against Romney. What hasn't been said often enough is that arguments against birth control are not only political losers, but that scientific and sociological observations alone should convince rational observers that America will never go back to its pre-Griswold stance.

### **Modern necessity**

Our bodies and our society have changed enough since the 19th century that it simply wouldn't work.

Consider Santorum's favorite alternative to birth control for unmarried people: abstinence.

Avoiding sexual intercourse before marriage may well have been a rational idea in the late 19th century, when social morés strictly limited unchaperoned contact during courtship.

The age of consent then was 10 to 12 years in most states, and marriages in the early teens were not uncommon.

The average age of menarche — onset of puberty in girls — was slightly older than 14 in 1900.

The odds were good then that the gap between sexual maturity and marriage was quite small, perhaps three to five years on average and often less.

In a culture that outwardly condemned premarital sex and lacked widespread access to birth control, abstinence may have been viable for some percentage of teens, especially if they were only expected to rely on it for a short time between puberty and marriage.

Fast forward to 2012. Today, the age of consent ranges from 16 to 18 in all states. The median age of first marriage has climbed to 28 for men and 26 for women. And most significantly, biological changes ascribed to a range of factors have driven the age of menarche down to 12, with many girls entering puberty as young as 10.

Do the math. Now the average span from sexual maturity to marriage is 14 years, often longer.

Abstinence that sometimes worked for about three years in 1900 is simply unrealistic when applied to the 14-year gap young people face today in a dramatically more sexualized culture.

### **Changing norms**

Even if one ignores the evidence, abstinence is not only unrealistic, it simply doesn't work because most people fail to abstain.

The investment of more than \$1 billion in federal funds to support abstinence-based sex education the past decade has not impacted our changing bodies and social norms at all. A 2007 study published in *Public Health Reports* found that the vast majority — 95 percent — of Americans have sex before marriage, 75 percent of them before 20.

Those are the facts and regardless of what Santorum thinks, we need to maintain access to birth control and comprehensive sex education for everyone if we're even remotely serious about reducing the numbers of unintended or unplanned pregnancies among American youth.

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As noted earlier, I'm concerned that so much of our public discourse is utterly devoid of facts so I try to include data in my columns whenever possible, especially when our politics depend so much on emotional appeals. But when a column runs on a holiday I've tended toward historical examples and a bit of nostalgia in my topics, on the assumption that people are reading the paper more casually and are less likely to be looking for opinion than simply something interesting to read on their day off. Independence Day offers the chance to mix nostalgia and politics, easily lending itself to wistful themes about "the way things used to be" in much the same as Christmas might, if only it too fell on the first Wednesday of the month.

When writing about historical practices I've come to rely on the device used in this July 4th column, looking back to the same day 50 or 100 years before. In this case I had a delightful time reading the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* headlines from July 5, 1912, which offered both a chance to bemoan the loss of community traditions long passed and room to make the classic argument that "the more things change, the more they stay the same."

Dateline: *St. Cloud Times*, July 4, 2012

## **July 4th was day for community**

What is your Fourth of July tradition? Today, Central Minnesotans will gather to celebrate Independence Day, enjoying family picnics, fireworks, parades and other activities venerated as tradition.

But how much of this actually reflects longstanding American practice? Perhaps the most obvious shift in Fourth of July celebrations has been the decline of community-focused events. While some vibrant exceptions remain — the annual parade in St. Joseph is a good example — historical celebrations were oriented more around neighborhood or community than most are today.



A century ago, Americans celebrated July Fourth with great enthusiasm, and much of that celebration was collective. For example, on July 4, 1912, in Washington, D.C., all residents were asked to display flags on their homes. Neighborhoods planned events ranging from picnics to baseball games, motorcycle races to fireworks displays. Track and field contests were quite popular, with events divided by gender and age. One neighborhood group even featured a “fat men’s race” and a 50-yard dash for “women over 150 pounds.” Band concerts and political speeches capped the evening off, followed by military salutes by cannon or rifles.

New York City’s festivities were on an even grander scale in 1912, as *The New York Times* reported, “Every hour of the day and every area of the city was given over to celebration.” The Declaration of Independence was read and the national anthem sung across the boroughs as the new 48-star flag was raised above City Hall at sunrise. A half-million people visited Coney Island’s amusements that day, and 300,000 watched the city’s schoolboys compete in track and field. A “Parade of All Nations” wound up Wall Street and Broadway, a “demonstration of the infinitely cosmopolitan nationality whose birth all the ceremony was to commemorate.” Groups of Hawaiian, Finnish, Greek, Scotch, Chinese, Italian, Hungarian, and Native American heritage were all featured. That evening, 15 city parks were lit with lanterns by the New York Edison Co. The 100,000 bulbs drew “great throngs” to the novel display of electric light, likely as vivid as fireworks to those unused to outdoor illumination on such scale.

Interestingly, concern about the safety of fireworks and noise in general were major issues in 1912.

Just four years prior, Washington had banned the sale of fireworks to any but “authorized public committees” in effort to stave off injuries and reduce the noise that had marked previous celebrations. Many of the elaborately orchestrated public events were in fact part of the this effort, aimed at bringing people together for “safe and sane” celebration in lieu of using explosives at home.

New York similarly planned for its “sanest fourth” in 1912, seeking to avoid “firecracker riots” of the past through a program offering events ranging from military bands to folk dancing, theatrical performances to Boy Scout canoe races. Forty-seven people in New York had died from firework accidents in 1911, so the call for a safer celebration in 1912 was generally well received. *The Washington Post* did note, however, that one group — the Association of Oldest Inhabitants — “will have none of the safe and sane Fourth.” Instead they planned to ring the bell at the volunteer fire department continuously for 30 minutes starting at noon.

Political oration, one of the oldest Independence Day traditions, was still commonplace in 1912. People listened to these speeches, sometimes for hours. They were citizens of a young, growing and forward-looking nation that was bound by a common sense patriotism not yet commercialized, reduced to bumper-sticker slogans, or harnessed to partisan aims.

This is perhaps our greatest loss, as our modern celebrations no longer feature discussion, debate or even much thought about the meaning of patriotism or the common bonds we share with our neighbors and fellow citizens. Today, it seems “Independence Day” really has become simply “the fourth,” another in a long string of holidays known best as a day off from work, distinct perhaps only for the fireworks that our forebearers failed to snuff out a century ago.

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The historical conceit of “100 Years Ago Today” has proven quite useful over the years, not only on holidays, but frankly at times when I simply couldn’t think of a topic worth writing about and needed some inspiration. Skimming through the online version of *The New York Times* from another decade almost always yields a subject for a column, even if it’s not as clearly related to current events as the editor might like.

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A dozen years into my role as a columnist I’ve learned a great deal about writing and connecting with non-academic audiences. I’ve received hundreds of emails from readers, a gratifying number agreeing with me or at times even thanking me for speaking out. Others have written to disagree, sometimes strongly, though no more than a few dozen have actually been coarse, rude, or threatening. I have, though, been called a Communist, a Socialist, an atheist, a Catholic, an elitist, an out-of-touch academic, and many other things.

My columns have yielded invitations to speak in local schools, at senior centers, and before organizations like the League of Women Voters and Rotary. I’ve been interviewed on Minnesota Public Radio, WJON, and twice even hit the big time at SCSU’s campus-based television station! A few of my columns have been picked up and reprinted in other outlets, and I know many more have been shared by readers who have emailed them to friends or passed copies around to neighbors. Strangers have even stopped me on the street, recognizing me from the photo that runs with the column, to comment on a topic or simply say thanks for articulating a position they shared.

Knowing that people are reading and reacting to my work has been one of the most gratifying parts of the experience, especially when individual columns by themselves have eclipsed the total amount of reader feedback I’ve received on all the academic prose I’ve ever published.

My newspaper work has also made me a better writer — and a better teacher. I’m finally learning to do what I’ve always asked of my students: be concise. While I’d long written book reviews with modest word limits, I’ve found the challenge of

limiting myself to 850 words (and later 750 words when the editorial page was reformatted) on a controversial topic to be the hardest part of the process. Many of my first drafts exceed 1,000 words, and after painful cuts still sit at 750 or 800 before I give up and pass them on to my primary editor — my wife, Theresa Anderson, who reads every column before I make the final edits. Her role as my first reader has dramatically improved the final product, just as I tell my students asking a friend to read a draft will improve their writing.

Along with general concision has come economy of argument; as an historian I'm used to having plenty of space to lay out evidence in detail, and there are always footnotes for anything that won't fit in the body. I've had to cut some wonderful quotations and compelling evidence due to space constraints, but after several years became convinced that the result was a tighter piece that would be more likely to find an audience.

Being more conscious of audience is another side benefit. Instead of writing for other academics, I've learned to write with a variety of readers in mind. Having a sense of who will be reading has led to shifts in vocabulary, tone, and style, taking me well away from the dispassionate and objective academic voice I was trained to write in years ago. Though Theresa often says I pull my punches, I've come to believe that moderating my opinions for the audience at hand must increase their impact. Writing to convince, rather than simply argue, has been a conscious goal. With some evident success I'm reluctant to change that now, in any case.

Being an academic in the 21st century is no easy task. Though a 1949 Gallop poll found "professors" ranking second only to medical doctors in public trust, with responses four times higher than businessmen and fully eightfold better than lawyers, today we too often find ourselves castigated as out-of-touch elitists by politicians or simply dismissed as irrelevant by people who see little value in what we might call (without a hint of irony it appears) "the life of the mind." Differentiating between academia and "the real world" has become commonplace even within the academy. It's been my hope all along that by speaking out on a regular basis in the local paper, complete with a little photo and an email address inviting comment, at

least a few people might come to realize that academics aren't all living in a world of abstraction and that intellectual arguments do indeed have a place in public discourse.

A recent exchange with a Red Cross volunteer reminded me why I've kept this up for over a dozen years. I'd just finished donating blood and was sitting at the table having a drink and a cookie before leaving when the canteen attendant approached and struck up a conversation.

"Are you Derek Larson?" she asked.

"Yes," I responded with a bit of hesitation. (Was something wrong with my blood?)

"You're the one who writes in the paper, aren't you?" she continued.

"Yes ..." (I guessed it wasn't my blood.)

"I read your column all the time. I just wanted to say thanks for speaking up like you do. It's good to know I'm not the only one who feels this way about things."

I thanked her, ate another cookie, and left wondering what I'd write about next month to keep her reading.

The *St. Cloud Times* and opinion page editor Randy Krebs came up with the novel idea of developing a stable of local writers in 2000. In the years since, nearly 100 people have taken up residence on the opinion page, producing well over 3,000 columns in an operation that is apparently unique in the newspaper business.

At some point I'll no doubt decide to throw in the towel and go back to writing for tiny audiences of experts interested in topics of which the average newspaper reader has never heard. When I do I hope another academic is waiting to step in, because it's been a fascinating experience and

I think the community is better off when more of us speak to our neighbors, instead of just one another. Until that day comes I'll be found sitting at my computer late on the first Sunday of every month, combing the news for inspiration in time to make the deadline Monday at noon, in what has ultimately become a significant part of my intellectual and professional identity.

It's something I could never have foreseen as a college sophomore earnestly drafting a letter to the editor late in the evening of Veterans Day in 1987, but hindsight tells me that young man had similar hopes for his letter as I do for every column I write: that it finds an audience, changes some minds, and prompts at least a few readers to action.

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### **Acknowledgment**

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