

BEFORE A KEY'S BEEN STRUCK

By Michael Ventura

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"But they're useless," Picasso said of computers, "they can only give you answers!"

Sure, on one level Picasso was just being cute. Even when he made his quip, about 30 years ago, it was obvious computers would supply much more than answers. The issue is far more subtle: The greatest value of computers may not be in what they do; the greatest value of computers may be that their very existence poses a previously unimaginable spectrum of problems and questions. They cast in an entirely new light, and in shockingly new terms, the question of what it means to be a human being -- a question that every generation must ask anew to retain and extend its humanity. For this, computer technology can only be thanked. Anyone threatened by such a fundamental question -- "What does it mean *now* to be human?" -- isn't being threatened by technology; they're threatened, at heart, by their own fragile connection to themselves, and to the human procession, the human heritage. Yet it is also true that we need to be threatened on those terms, because only by that threat, that challenge, can we hope to renew our most essential connections to ourselves and to each other. In this way, again and again, history bids us to grow up -- or else.

For instance, in an interactive age of virtual realities, an era in which seemingly everything is absorbed and altered by the maw of cyberspace, a writer of books, a poet, a painter of canvases, is no longer supported by the evaporating hierarchy of values that once put books, poems, and paintings at the highest rung of culture. Now the writer, the poet, the painter, the musician, can be justified in what they do only by the fundamental reason that one writes or paints or plays: because you love it. If you don't love it, you have to get out of it, for possibilities of other rewards dwindle by the nanosecond. The new technologies also challenge your faith in your chosen and/or fated form of art: Does the form have the strength, in and of itself, without all the old supports, to survive in the coming, the already present, cyber-era? So many voices today say: No! Now you write, you paint, you create in the din of that No! -- an act of faith if ever there was one.

Or you don't write, paint, or whatever, you say good-bye to those arts -- but the arts may also be saying good riddance to you. For the forms themselves are alive, you know -- the Novel, the Poem, the Painting, the Music. As living things they demand life in return; as ancient things, they demand faith, for they were born when faith was felt to be the greatest strength and the most essential capability of humanity. For too many years glib nihilism and a manipulation of surfaces (often called "innovation") has dominated those arts and drained them of faith. They are tired of being practiced by people who don't really love them and don't have faith in their essential strengths -- novelists who are merely writing prose screenplays, painters who use their materials to express mere ideas about form rather than passions about experience. (For Picasso, Cubism was a passionate, risky response to the 20th century, as dissonance was for Thelonious Monk -- they weren't playing games.) The arts themselves are bored with so many of their "artists." The arts may feel that they get bigger as they get smaller. Their quietness is getting louder -- not in the society, but in the dedication art demands. Sit down at a blank page,

and get quiet enough within yourself, and you can feel the page calling for courage and faith.

A blank page, an empty canvas, a piano before a key's been struck -- they stand apart from the vagaries and fashions of history. Like the nanosecond, they are human creations but they are not quite human themselves and stand apart from human time. They demand that you take your stand -- not apart, like them, for you cannot be as pure as these arts, as you cannot be as fast as the nanosecond. Rather they demand that you stand in what you are, whatever you are and all that you are. Many attempt these arts when young, then, usually in their late 20s or early 30s, they let them go, and the excuse is usually money, security, failure; or some don't need an excuse, and are genuinely called elsewhere, to other endeavors; but for the excusers the real reason they flee their art is that to stand in what they are, in all that they are, becomes too excruciating, demands too much.

My brother Aldo put it in different, though congruent, terms. Here when he says "they" he means those forces that try to co-opt beauty or bulldoze it down: "There's always a part of you that's separate. And even if they're making you pay for it now, that separateness is what you have to offer. That person at the typewriter -- who you are when you're doing that -- that person doesn't belong to them. That's not a negotiable part. That's why you're an artist. That's what makes you an artist."

Using the same "they," the Polish poet Czeslaw Milosz wrote: "I prefer to lose thus than to win as they do." The arts, and the artists, do not negotiate with history. Or with that more polite word for history: society. We face it, sometimes argue with it, sometimes even change it, but we do not negotiate. For, as my friend Dave Johnson said, "Society measures you in the smallest terms that you'll permit." Accept the terms society demands, and you can't help but feel insignificant. Give those terms any credence at all, and you're negotiating -- whether you know it or not, you're trying to get society to agree with you. It won't. An artist who starts that sort of negotiation finds the best rationalization, and finds it fast, to do other work.

We all live in history, but it is no one's home. We all are history, but it is no one's body, no one's possession. We all make history, but it is in no one's control. And no one can speak for it. Anyone telling you you're irrelevant is only trying to beef up their own sense of importance. The new technologies are marvelous human creations, rife with beauty and trouble, like every human creation. And they pose tremendous questions; not to be grateful for those questions is not to be grateful for the sense of danger that keeps one alert. But there are those who think that the terms they project onto the new technologies are the only valid measures of judgment, and such people are now in control of the public discourse. They label as irrelevant anyone or anything who threatens their control, or who refuses to submit to it -- which amounts to the same thing. And nothing threatens the controllers more than people who quietly continue in what they love.

You can surf the Net for information, and information is valuable, but information is not knowledge. Knowledge requires contemplation -- a slow absorption that combines information with experience. The danger of cyberspace is that it is an information cacophony that overwhelms the possibility of contemplation in the unsuspecting. Maria Muldaur pointed out to me how telling it is that we call it a "Net" and a "Web" -- "They're things you get caught in." And then, when you're caught, you're eaten. What is eaten is your capacity to contemplate -- exactly what the blank page and the silent piano demand. What is eaten is your ability to assert your own terms against the world that is trying to define you.

I have no hope, but I have faith. To say you need hope to live is to say you need an excuse to live. To say you have faith is to say you'll follow your heart no matter what. I expect mystery, and I'm never disappointed.

Here is a reason for faith and a just measure of the dangers that we face. It was my privilege to have as a student Morgan Whirlledge, 15 years old. That he can write as he writes, and make music as he makes music (using computers as well as his piano) is part of my faith; and his vision alerts me to the danger:

"What's in? Why? The image, the look, the personality, the surface. It's in you, whether subconsciously or consciously, it's there. I think everyone knows and deals with this every day, minute, second of their lives." He goes on to speak of children assaulted by television, media, technology, abuse, ignorance, disrespect, and then he writes: "And so the kid sits, silent, in a mess of artificially inseminated thought. A shattered life around him, as easy to break as a mirror. He grows and eventually sees himself. A reflection. He is holding a sledgehammer, given to him by his world. It is for mending the shattered pieces of fragile glass."

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