WHY BOTHER WITH BOOKS?
(First Annual Eighth Day Symposium: January 29, 2011)

I've been charged with the task of explaining in some coherent form "why books?"—that is, paper and ink between covers—rather than "books" in some digital format, whether displayed on a conventional computer screen, a "tablet," Kindle or Nook, iPad or any variety of handheld objects. I think I was given the task because I've held forth with friends on many occasions (sometimes after a glass or two of wine) about the superiority of the former, and I must have waxed eloquent a time or two. Now I have my reward in full: to speak in an organized fashion, and without the accompanying wine. May God be with you, and me.

I admit that this is a visceral issue for me, but not only because my vocation is the selling of conventional books. It touches me at points of my development as a human being, so I'll continue here in a personal mode with some artifacts from my childhood, teenage years, and early adulthood. These artifacts are all, as you might have guessed, books.

Here is a copy of the very first book I remember "reading"—that is, as a four-year-old who could not yet really read, looking at the pages and narrating the story as best I could by looking at and interpreting the interspersed illustrations (maroon or black wood-cut engraving style drawings). It was one of the small bookshelf of books my family owned at the time, and called *The Real Book about the Wild West*, by Adolph Regli (published in 1952 by Franklin Watts, and part of a series of books titled *The Real Book of…* (fill in the blank). I remember what seemed hours lying on our green-carpeted living room floor with this book, in my initial stages of reading. There were of course hours more with this book after I really *could* read, now absorbing the engrossing narratives and unconsciously developing a love for history.

At age seven, in second grade, I happened to check out from the school library *George Washington* (published 1936), by the wonderful Norwegian husband and wife author/illustrator team of Edgar and Ingri D'Aulaire (their *Abraham Lincoln* won the Caldecott in 1939). The book's combination of unforgettably-vivid lithographed color illustrations and unabashed hero-worship and patriotism conveyed in a compelling narrative, absolutely captivated me. For years after encountering this book, I drew pictures of George Washington and imagined scenes from the American Revolution, after the style and colors of the D'Aulaires. And I voraciously read books—both fiction and non-fiction—about American history, and specifically the Revolution. The pursuit was not due to any class assignments, but to my fawning love sparked by a couple of books, to the indelible imprints these discrete objects made on my forming mind and soul.

Fast forward some ten years. I'm a high school junior, a cradle Orthodox Christian, caught up in the so-called "Jesus Movement" of the early 1970's sweeping the country at the time. I had a newfound enthusiasm for the Faith but few intellectual resources with which to undergird it. But I was a reader, and I was reading. In a footnote in a book I was reading called *Who Says God Created…?*, I saw a reference to a book by C.S. Lewis

called *Mere Christianity*. I bought and read the book—*this* book. This cheap, mass market paperback, *permanently* green and white, the text of which I boldly underlined in blue ink, *this book*, now barely intact. *This* book, immeasurably forming my apprehension of the content and extent of Christian faith, exciting my imagination and expanding my comprehension of its vastness and wisdom. I went on to read a good portion of the Lewis corpus. It opened to me worlds of discovery not only in Christian apologetics, but in philosophy, mythology, literary criticism, and memoir. The foundations, as it turned out, of a bookstore.

A year later, I received a book by an Orthodox seminarian who had been assigned for a summer to our local parish. He quickly became a mentor to me, and brought my Orthodox roots into closer connection with my immediate Jesus movement present enthusiasms. It was this book, *For the Life of the World* by Alexander Schmemann (in my memory permanently silver-covered with a lovely inscription on the title page from the giver), that interpreted all of salvation history through the lens of the Liturgy. It laid down a template by which to worship, by which to comprehend worship, by which to aspire to a way of living as a fully human being.

One more way station, ten years later: now married, working, but laid up for a few weeks with a slipped disc. I'm contentedly lying on a bed, enduring the pain with the prescribed Percodan. I'm reading Dom Gregory Dix's monumental *The Shape of the Liturgy* (*this* book, now jacketless, but which used to inhabit a forest-green jacket). And I'm learning that Schmemann's *For the Life of the World* meditations converge with the actual history of the Liturgy. I'm learning that the primordial Christian tradition of what we do in worship and in life in its fullness is in essence what Schmemann described as fulfilling our vocation as priests: giving thanks and joining ourselves to Christ's perfect self-offering to the Father. Here's the decisive passage from Dix, parts of which I can almost quote by heart:

> From the days of Clement of Rome in the first century, for whom our Lord is the "High-priest of our offerings" Who is "in the heights of the heavens" it can be said with truth that this doctrine of the offering of the earthly eucharist by the heavenly Priest at the heavenly altar is to all intents and purposes the only conception of the Eucharistic sacrifice which is known anywhere in the church…I have read every sentence of every Christian author extant from the period before Nicaea, most of it probably eight or a dozen times or oftener. It is difficult to prove a negative from so vast and disparate a mass of material, but I have paid particular attention to this point for some years. I think I can state as a fact that…there is *no* pre-Nicene author Eastern or Western whose Eucharistic doctrine is at all fully stated, who does not regard the offering and consecration of the eucharist as the present action of our Lord Himself, the Second Person of the Trinity. And in the overwhelming majority of writers it is made clear that their whole conception revolves around the figure of the High-priest at the altar in heaven. (*Shape of the Liturgy*, 253)

Dix's reading of "every sentence of every Christian author extant from the period of Nicaea"—an astounding claim given the enormous number of books from the period — resulted in a book that permanently enriched my participation in the life of the Church.

I could go on with other books—I am powerfully tempted. And I'm certain that each of you has a comparable set of books and memories that have indelibly shaped, informed, or changed your lives. But I hope you catch my meaning. Books—real, discrete objects—have been my own personal Bethels, "stones" that marked times of specific epiphanies for me. The object and the experience they mediated are inseparable.

Of course, there is also much to praise about physical books along more pedestrian lines, as marvelous technological objects in themselves. Listen to Robert Darnton, Renaissance scholar and director of the Harvard Library system, from his essay "E-Books and Old Books":

> Consider the book. It has extraordinary staying power. Ever since the invention of the codex sometime close to the birth of Christ, it has proven to be a marvelous machine—great for packaging information, convenient to thumb through, comfortable to curl up with, superb for storage, and remarkably resistant to damage. It does not need to be upgraded or downloaded, accessed or booted, plugged into circuits or extracted from webs. Its design makes it a delight to the eye. Its shape makes it a pleasure to hold in the hand. And its handiness has made it the basic tool of learning for thousands of years. (Darnton, *The Case for Books*)

So now we turn from physical books—whether stone tablet, scroll, or codex—each of which have been the conveyors of thought for many millennia, to the electronic digital world in which we have been immersed for the last twenty years or so. The blindingly rapid rise of the Internet (and the digital books it makes possible) I must admit is as momentous as Gutenberg's press and the Industrial Revolution and all the electronic and communications revolutions that followed in its train. It seems unarguable that nothing's been the same since the Internet arrived: we do business differently, buy and sell, pay and receive, communicate, organize our schedules, and *read* differently now. It is changing in breathtaking ways the structure of our whole civilization. And I think, if anything, I'm understating things.

Paleontologist Scott Sampson, in a short reflection in a collection called *Is the Internet Changing the Way You Think?* conveniently sums up the fundamental pro and con of the Internet as the Great Source for Information and the Great Distraction fostering compulsions to stay connected. On the "pro" side, we must give the Internet its due. It is marvelous and almost magical, multiplying many times the store of knowledge available to anyone in mere moments, facilitating communication beyond our wildest imaginations even a half-century ago, and simplifying and accelerating hosts of previously tedious tasks. It's not hard to make a long list of the great things the Internet has done for us, perhaps the most jaw-dropping (but potentially insidious) being Google's ongoing project to scan and make available digitally nearly every book in the world—the so-called

Google Book Search (to which we will return a bit later). Yes, the Internet is a wondrous tool, indeed. The problem is, as is the case with many new technologies, that we forget that the Net is a tool. Instead of using the tool, the tool begins to use us. We become unconscious of being used, as we are numbed by immersion in a new kind of technological miasma. Of course, Neil Postman dissected all this twenty years ago in his book, *Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology*.

There has been an increasing torrent of books and articles recently reflecting on the Internet as The Great Distraction, and I've read a few. The first I'll mention is (provocatively titled) *The Dumbest Generation: How the Digital Age Stupefies Young Americans and Jeopardizes Our Future*", published in 2008 by Emory University English professor and former director of research and analysis at the National Endowment for the Arts, Mark Bauerlein. Bauerlein is *not* saying that "the Millennials"—those youth who've grown up in the Digital Age—are less intelligent than their predecessors. He *is* saying that due to the digital environment in which they live and move and have their being, they are working with a much smaller store of *acquired* knowledge, contrasting the dizzying quantity of information available online with that which has actually been embraced and mastered. Bauerlein collaborated with Catholic poet and head of the NEA from 2002-2009 Dana Gioia, in publishing the influential NEA reports *Reading at Risk* and *To Read or Not To Read: A Question of National Consequence*, which combined careful research and a sense of urgency about the rapid decline of reading in all age groups in the United States. The omnipresence of numerous screens—television, PC's, laptops, iPads, tablets, increasingly sophisticated cell phones—and their facilitation of immersion in texting and social media during all waking hours, have steadily pushed aside time devoted to reading or attendance to serious music, theater, and fine art. Bauerlein warns:

> Every hour on MySpace, then, means an hour not practicing a musical instrument or learning a foreign language or watching C-SPAN. Every cell-phone call interrupts a chapter of Harry Potter or a look at the local paper. These are mind-maturing activities, and they don't have to involve Great Books and Big Ideas. They have only to cultivate habits of analysis and reflection, and implant knowledge of the world beyond…Digital tools have designs on the eyes and ears of the kids, and they pursue them aggressively. Once youths enter the digital realm, the race for attention begins, and it doesn't like to stop for a half-hour with a novel or a trip to the museum. Digital offerings don't like to share, and tales of Founding Fathers and ancient battles and Gothic churches can't compete with a message from a boyfriend, photos from the party, and a new device in the Apple Store window. (Bauerlein, *The Dumbest Generation*)

Bauerlein goes on to report the sad collusion between avant-garde educators and the digital media industry to dethrone the book from its traditional place at the center of the school and the library, convinced that substituting digital reading on laptops and tablets is equivalent to reading books. He recounts one instance after another of libraries emptying their shelves of books, hundreds of millions of dollars spent to create wireless and paperless schools, with negligible or net negative results for the students. Being the

researcher behind the *Reading at Risk* report, Bauerlein has the expertise to marshal study after survey after anecdote to back up his dark vision of the increasingly desiccated nature of youth literacy and general historical and cultural awareness. He sees it as a threat not only to the quality and workplace preparedness of the graduates of our schools, but to the vitality and coherence of our communities and of democracy itself.

Whereas Bauerlein's book focuses mostly on the young, a book written in the same key strikes some different notes, no less alarming. Nicholas Carr's *The Shallows: What the Internet is Doing to Our Brains*, is an extension of the author's famous (or notorious) article in *The Atlantic*, published in 2008, "Is Google Making Us Stupid?" Carr, a media and technology analyst, after "over a decade spending a lot of time online, searching and surfing" in the line of duty, began to be troubled after he realized that he had difficulty reading a book or a substantive article:

> My mind would get caught up in the twists of the narrative or the turns of the argument, and I'd spend hours strolling through long stretches of prose. That's rarely the case anymore. Now my concentration starts to drift after a page or two. I get fidgety, lose the thread, begin looking for something else to do. I feel like I'm always dragging my wayward brain back to the text. The deep reading that used to come naturally has become a struggle. (Carr, *The Shallows*)

Carr freely grants that "the Web's been a godsend to me as a writer. Research that once required days in the stacks or periodical rooms of libraries can now be done in minutes. A few Google searches, some quick clicks on hyperlinks, and I've got the telltale fact or the pithy quote I was after." He describes the initial exhilaration of new technologies:

> The flood of free content [turning] into a tidal wave. Headlines streamed around the clock through my Yahoo home page and my RSS feed reader. One click on a link led to a dozen or a hundred more…I started letting my newspaper and magazine subscriptions lapse. Who needed them? By the time the print editions arrived, dew-dampened or otherwise, I felt like I'd already seen all the stories. (Carr, *The Shallows*)

In an apt metaphor, Carr explains "Once I was a scuba diver in the sea of words. Now I zip along the surface like a guy on a Jet Ski." He continues:

> A serpent of doubt slithered into my info-paradise. I began to notice that the Net was exerting a much stronger and broader influence over me than my old stand-alone PC ever had…The very way my brain worked seemed to be changing. It was then that I began worrying about my inability to pay attention to one thing for more than a couple of minutes…my brain, I realized, wasn't just drifting. It was hungry. It was demanding to be fed the way the Net fed it—and the more it was fed, the hungrier it became…the Internet, I sensed, was turning me into something like a high-speed data-processing machine…I missed my old brain. (Carr, *The Shallows*)

Carr, investigator that he is, launches forays into the history of reading, of the computer; into the history of neuroscience, recent discoveries from which emphasize the brain's "neuroplasticity"—the tendency of parts of the brain to reshape themselves in response to injury by way of compensation, or develop or atrophy by habitual use or disuse. Indeed, neurophysiology plays a significant role in Carr's narrative, as he relates scientific research revealing that interaction with the Internet lights up the frontal cortex of our brains, where short term or "working" memory processes immediate experience; while reading conventional books exercises the hippocampus, a different, deeper part of the brain associated with the transmission of long-term memory to the cortex of the brain.

All of which gives force to Carr's assertion that the Internet changes the way we think. The Internet, by its natural force of rapid movement from one screen to the next, from one piece of information to the hypertext's other—and the digital books to which it gives birth and to which it is so similar—occupy the lion's share of our daily online experience. Digital books share the habitual characteristics of their environment, the Internet. Those experienced and embedded in the normal way of reading linear text in physical books might be able to read "deeply" the given digital text, but the increasing numbers of those immersed in a digital environment will only bring the tools given them by that environment. They will find it increasingly unnatural to read physical books, and I believe, increasingly unable and disinclined to read at all.

Carr's case against those who would seek to relativize the media of our reading becomes most passionate in his chapter, "The Church of Google." In it we are told of Google's self-described mission, "to organize the world's information and make it universally accessible and useful," which, we are told by Google CEO Eric Schmidt, will take about 300 years. (At this point I begin to get a little "creeped out," as my kids might put it, and begin to find myself mentally making Tower of Babel associations.) Google's "moon shot," as one of its chief executives put it, is the Google Book Search—the effort to scan and digitize all the books ever printed and make them "discoverable and searchable online." Begun in 2005, agreements with two dozen major research libraries have resulted in Google's digitizing over ten million books in the public domain (complex issues involved in scanning books under copyright are at stake in a lawsuit in U.S. District Court in New York City, the decisions from which will be of indefinite yet immense consequence for copyright law and for the future of Google Book Search). The results frighten Carr, who warns:

> The inevitability of turning the pages of books into online images should not prevent us from considering the side-effects. To make a book discoverable and searchable online is also to dismember it. The cohesion of its text, the linearity of its argument or narrative as it flows through scores of pages, is sacrificed. What that ancient Roman craftsman wove together when he created the first codex is unstitched. The quiet that was "part of the meaning" of the codex is sacrificed as well. Surrounding every page or snippet of text on GBS is a welter of links, tools, tabs, and ads, each eagerly angling for a share of the reader's fragmented attention. (Carr, *The Shallows*)

Of course, we need not wait for the completion of the GBS project to observe the rapid digitization of books and their consumption via Kindles and Nooks and Sony Readers and iPads. E-books are here, and will never go away. Their manifest qualities of convenience and immense storage capabilities are imposing, seeming to render any objections silly and Luddite. They are already selling in the millions and rapidly reconfiguring the publishing and bookselling industries. Books have been transformed into commodities since Gutenberg, but with the capability of downloading them onto handheld devices, a revolution is occurring, heedless of the long-term consequences. Books might now descend from being commodities to the ephemeral, disposable level of e-mails.

Nicholas Carr cuts to the chase in a passage from a short essay in the collection edited by John Brockman, *Is the Internet Changing the Way You Think?* After relating what to me is a pure nightmare scenario, the decision by a prestigious prep school in Massachusetts to empty its library of books and install "state-of-the-art computers with high-definition screens for research and reading," he quotes the headmaster as saying, "it is utterly immaterial to me whether they're doing [their readings] by way of a Kindle or by way of a paperback." Carr begs to differ:

> Tracy [the headmaster] is wrong. The medium does matter. It matters greatly. The experience of reading words on a networked computer, whether it's a PC, an iPhone, or a Kindle, is very different from the experience of reading those same words in a book. As a technology, a book focuses our attention, isolates us from the myriad distractions that fill our everyday lives. A networked computer does precisely the opposite. It is designed to scatter our attention. It doesn't shield us from environmental distractions; it adds to them. The words on a computer screen exist in a welter of contending stimuli. (Carr, from *Is the Internet Changing the Way You Think?)*

I find all of this deeply saddening and ask myself what has really been the origin of the foregoing observations. Why am I so sad? Is it because I sell books, and selling e-books holds no appeal? Is it because e-books threaten my livelihood? I think I can honestly answer "no" (there are many more immediate threats). I also reject what might be called the aesthetic objection to the electronic book (which I think can easily descend into sentimentality), declaiming the beauty of physical books as objects, the way they smell, the way they feel, etc. No, there is a more profound objection or resistance to the e-book, which, for lack of a better label, I'll call theological.

I'll just say it: e-books are a Gnostic technology that nourishes Gnostic tendencies. (I'm being serious.) I've been taught, and know historically, that Gnosticism is the ur-heresy. When we read physical books, the text is physically mediated in a delightful, infinite variety of ways. The word comes incarnate in ink and paper and covers. The word in e-books, I know, is also physically mediated, but it tends toward the virtual and renders the medium, well, immaterial. Just as the Docetic variety of early Christian Gnosticism taught that Christ only seemed to be human, so e-books lend a ghostly air to the screen presence of whatever text it displays.

I began this talk by relating a number of books and the deeply formative reading experiences they rendered, saying that "the object and the experience they mediated are inseparable." I can't imagine saying the same about any electronic reading experience. Yes, the electronic text is "there"—but just barely. There's not very much "there," there. The incarnate element involved in reading has nearly disappeared, and our nature as composite beings of flesh and spirit—this nature for which Christ took flesh—are left strangely starved. Our physical natures, yearning for incarnate spiritual experience, are considered irrelevant. There is no longer a sense of journey or pilgrimage through a story, as anyone who's read with delight or arduous sweat a long text knows. The e-text floats in a boundless sea of nearly identical pages, and any sense of beginning, middle, and end has fled away. In a physical book, the text has particularity, to which we can relate even spatially—how many times have you been looking for a sentence or a passage, and said something like "it's on the right-hand page, about three lines from the top"? And this memory was immediate and precious to you? The proponent of the digital book might reply by doing an electronic search of his text and immediately locating the sought passage—but is there a real sense of *where it is* in relation to the rest of the book? The book itself is marked by our journey through it—yellow highlighter here, coffee stain there, spaghetti sauce spattered on page 45. We yearn for physicality—it's our created nature—and books satisfy. We mark them, they mark us. It's an intricate, beautiful physical/spiritual dance.

"The object and the experience they mediated are inseparable." I might just as well have said that good books—good words incarnate—are sacramental. Mediators of grace. And consistent with our nature.

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