Slow Learners

There continues to be much ado about online learning, through the edX partnership and elsewhere in higher education (see page 64). But other kinds of learning remain the dominant, most effectual form of education.

In “The Power of Patience” (page 40), Agassiz professor of the humanities Jennifer L. Roberts vividly makes the case for leading her students, in the classroom and at museums, to decouple from technology, in order to undertake the difficult work of immersive learning, mastering a subject through deliberate, demanding, direct engagement with their object of study. In “Learning, and Life, in the Houses” (page 46), deputy editor Craig Lambert considers the College’s residences: an experiment in American higher education, dedicated in the 1930s to the proposition that communities of students and adults could best learn from interacting with one another. That experiment, completely validated, is now being renewed—and perhaps matters more than ever in a newly digital century. For other perspectives on teaching and learning, please read the review of Higher Education in America, the latest, most sweeping overview of the subject by one of its foremost analysts: president emeritus Derek Bok (page 26).

Porter Brown reports on John S. Wilson Jr., president emeritus Derek Bok (page 26). And Harvard Magazine, 7 Ware Street, Cambridge, Mass. 02138-4037, phone 617-495-5746, fax 617-495-0324. The magazine is supported by reader contributions and subscriptions, advertising revenue, and a subvention from Harvard University. Its editorial content is the responsibility of the editors. Periodicals postage paid at Boston, Mass., and additional mailing offices. Postmaster: Send address changes to Circulation Department, Harvard Magazine, 7 Ware Street, Cambridge, Mass. 02138-4037.

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LETTERS

Cambridge 02138

The humanities, the Internet, Alzheimer’s care

SELF-FASHIONING

I enjoyed Nannerl O. Keohane’s “Self-Fashioning in Society and Solitude” (September-October, page 42) with a friend and fellow Harvard graduate (class of 2003). We thought Keohane nicely described the tension between the life of action and the need for solitude.

We disagreed, however, about her use of “self.” My friend thought it helpful; I didn’t. I don’t see myself as a fashioned “self.” By using the reflexive, do I contradict what I just said? No, because I think when the Oracle enjoins one to “Know thyself,” the reflexive includes the inner being of the knower: the sum of memory, imagination, and inner talk. The Greeks, Rousseau, and Montaigne called it the soul.

Keohane does not use this word. Its use is not in fashion. Quoting approvingly from Stephen Greenblatt, she defines the self as an order, a mode of address, and a structure of bounded desires. Of its contents we are told nothing. Her notion of self-fashioning prompted me to wonder whether at each new stage of one’s education the individual needs a teacher, as Emile and Sophie did when they became parents.

Early in Emile, Rousseau directs his readers to another account of education, one that enriches the inner life, and one that speaks to me:

Do you want to get an idea of public education? Read Plato’s Republic. It is not at all a political work, as those think who judge books only by their titles. It is the most beautiful educational treatise ever written.

In “Self-Fashioning in Society and Solitude,” Nannerl O. Keohane argues that, except in religious orders, it has been easier for men than women to enjoy the benefits of occasional solitude. Another and simpler exception—no creeds, no celibacy—is the Quaker meeting, where women and men have been equal for centuries. Solitude in a group? The key is the silence. The idea is to put aside immediate concerns and “wait upon the word of the Lord,” which, for many of us, means listening to our best selves. Everyone has a best self, though not everyone can stand an hour’s silence.

ON THE HUMANITIES

Regarding “Invigorating the Humanities” (September-October, page 54): One wonders if the group studying the 50 percent drop in humanities concentrators considered, as a possible factor, the oft-noted, significant liberal-left bias in university faculties.
How that affects Harvard specifically I don’t know; but the virulent reaction to a hypothetical question posed by then-President Lawrence Summers in 2005 regarding possible gender differences, as well as the furor evoked by his insistence on minimal academic responsibilities on the part of professor Cornel West, would raise suspicions. Could it be that undergraduates are smart enough to distinguish education from indoctrination? One should at least ask that question.

**Peter Heiman ’64**
**Bronx, N.Y.**

**DEAN** Diana Sorensen says, “The point of an undergraduate education in the humanities is to develop...a sense of how to reason rigorously, how to express ideas in a compelling way, and how to write well.” If that were true, those pragmatic goals could be achieved as well or better just by providing courses on logic, English composition, and (perhaps at the Business School) salesmanship or advertising. Few students, moreover, will likely be attracted to what she describes as a humanities curriculum designed to answer such questions as “how do you build a meaningful life, what do you think about war, or what is the meaning of love?” These are nice questions to discuss over coffee at Starbucks, in more cozy settings, or with a venerable guru at his mountain cave (remember all those cartoons about the meaning of life?). But they are not topics to convince bright students that humanities courses offer more than bull sessions for credit. I hope Sorensen will find more compelling ways to invigorate the humanities.

**Paul K. Alkon ’57**
**Rolling Hills Estates, Calif.**

**DIVINE ORIGINS**

“LIFE’S BEGINNINGS” (September-October, page 29), by Courtney Humphries, is most interesting. Great research. But many Harvard alumni who respect and appreciate science also believe in God, believe that He created this world (and many others), and man in his image, endowing him with divine potential as sons and daughters of God (Genesis 1:26-27). Understandably, however, the article omits any reference to God in relation to the creation.

**Marvin R. Vandam, M.B.A. ’68**
**Holladay, Utah**

Our nation’s founding fathers believed in God and that an ongoing commitment to Him and His commandments is essential to our prosperity and preservation. We’ve all read their statements. And Bible believers among us (which includes Dr. Francis S. Collins, former head of the Human Genome Project and now the National Institutes of Health; see his book The Language of God concerning God-directed evolution) believe that God put into man “the breath of life; and man became a living soul” (Genesis 27).

The study of ancient documents, which burgeoned after the 1940s discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Egyptian Nag Hammadi Library, has produced many documents parallel to the Bible, some of them describing God’s “creation” of the cosmos (“organization” of matter and energy, better said) and His creation of life through the instrumentality of light, the “spark” of life. Let good research continue. In the end it should lead to a greater understanding of God and His creations.

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LETTERS

INTERNET FOR ALL
Judging from Elizabeth Gudrais’s discussion of The End of Big (“Rise of the Little Guy,” September-October, page 13), author Nicco Mele tries too hard to make a case for the obvious: the Internet can be used for good or evil. So can every other form of human communication. Yes, modern technology makes it vastly easier to quickly reach huge numbers of people, and obviously that calls for certain protections. But the irony in some of Mele’s examples is breathtaking: “who will produce reliable journalism if all the newspapers die?” “the Internet…could lead to the election of demagogues”; “who will guarantee the safety of products such as aircraft and pharmaceuticals?”

With his background in journalism and politics, Mele should be well aware of the abysmal failure of the major news sources to fully and accurately inform the public; the frequent failures of the Food and Drug Administration, the Department of Agriculture, and other government regulators to protect the public when profits are at stake; as well as the enormously uphill battle good candidates face against massive infusions of cash into elections from corporate interests. The Internet is the only real way for fair-minded people to stay informed and fight back…and now it is under attack as well.

Yes, illegal and harmful activities are conducted online, but if would-be consumers of contract killings and sex slavery can find the purveyors, so can law enforcement.

Mele’s closing note of optimism seems sadly empty. Yes, the Internet could be part of a rebirth of democracy, but the sad truth is that power coalesces, grows, and corrupts. If “Net neutrality takes a dive, so will our aspirations of ever having a fair and democratic society. Not all stories have happy endings.

John Broussard ’49  
Kelly Pomeroy  
Kawaihae, Hawaii

ALZHEIMER’S AMENDMENTS
There are several significant errors in an otherwise excellent article on the challenges of caring for Alzheimer’s patients (“Coping with Alzheimer’s,”” New England Regional Section,” September-October, page 28).

Medicare does not cover long-term care in nursing homes. This type of care is covered by Medicaid for patients who have insufficient funds to pay privately. Medicare only covers rehabilitation care up to 90 days following a three-day hospitalization. In addition, the costs for assisted living and nursing home care are reversed. Assisted living averages about $3,000 a year while nursing-home care costs $7,000 to $9,000 a month: $84,000-$108,000 a year.

Because Alzheimer’s patients now often live several years in a nursing home and the number of patients with this problem has increased so much, Alzheimer’s is approaching heart disease and cancer as our most costly disease.

Karl Singer ’63, M.D. ’67
Kensington, N.H.

The correspondent is medical director of a 220-bed nursing home and board-certified geriatrician.

Nell Porter Brown replies: Due to incorrect information provided to Harvard Magazine, the article implied that Medicare covers housing costs in nursing homes. Medicaid covers these costs for those with “insufficient funds.” Medicare also pays for preventive and other aspects of healthcare for people in institutional settings who have dementia. Regarding the cost of dementia care, information provided to the magazine, and published in the print version, was more fully explained: “Currently, regional high-end assisted-living facilities with dementia care can cost as much as $5,000 or $9,000 a month, and rely primarily on private payments that only a small fraction of Americans can afford. Nationwide, the average cost of Alzheimer’s care at an assisted-living community is about $4,800 a month and between $6,400 and $7,000 a month at a nursing home, according to a 2010 MetLife Mature Market Study. However, prices range widely.”

FAN MAIL
Upon receiving the September-October issue, I scanned the cover. “Nothing good inside, I can whip this off quickly, in the brief breaks I’m taking” (from lawn-mowing at noon on this much too hot and bright day).

Leafing through it, the heading Energy Divestiture caught my eye: letters by Gitlin & Strassman pushing President Faust and Harvard Corp. to be leaders for climate change, not be politically cautious. Then more on Monro’s impact. Then “Rise of the Little Guy,” with the amazing powers and dark side of “Davids vs
Goliaths” on the Internet, sobering me on our new reality. “Global Whitemanism” showed an amazing parallel world that could have arisen from imperial elements of the antebellum South, complete with a print. A dark side, again. I was ready for something lighter, so I got into goat-cheese production for which Sandvoss ’02 abandoned theater & Hollywood, which was juxtaposed with the Zimbabwe refugee story. Rewarding myself for finishing the lawn, I gave in and read “The E-mail gee story. Rewarding myself for

I was totally awed by the quality of what I had read, and the personal and political depth of it, and the writing skill from letters to brief sidebars—which I happened to find while avoiding all the cover stories and most of the major ones. The print & pictures pulled me further into the articles as well. This must be the full magazine, not the truncated one that you threatened to send to those of us who never sent in money. I am so renewed and thankful that I am writing my first check now. Where is it appropriate I submit this letter? Who knows? I’ll try out my Middle Tennessee Harvard Alumni Club, you at the Harvard Magazine so you know how grateful I am, and my two dear former roommates, Mike Hattwick and Doug Shapiro. You at the magazine are welcome to use this letter in any way you wish; I’m just delighted that I had the time (I didn’t) to discover your radiance. I can’t say enough, keep it up!

Ironically, “The Persistence of Print” just came to me in another form: e-mail, threatening the creative destruction of print on paper, even as it discusses the physicality of print for Ashbery’s poems.

Hamp ton P. Howell ’63
Nashville

ERRATA

HELEN VENDLER reported that we misquot ed George Herbert, who brought “thoughts,” not “poems,” to church (“A Nearly Perfect Book,” September-October, page 34); Christa Kuljian wrote that the photograph accompanying “Open Book” in that issue (page 19) was taken by David Goldblatt (not David Goodman). We regret these errors.


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