
Moving

THE TRANSONOM

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The nine-storey building housing my academic department and several others was, as of January 2011, and depending upon whom you believed, either on the verge of collapse or merely in need of structural tweaking. In any case, we faculty were told to clean out our offices and leave the building by the second week in May. My office contained thirteen seven-foot bookcases filled to overflowing, five file cabinets bulging at the seams, and a desk so laden with paper that its surface had not been visible for years. So, during the next four months, I sorted, packed, hauled, and stored approximately two tons of printed matter, four or five cartons at a time, despite warnings issued by Mother Nature and Father Time that I should hire it done before I hurt myself. Well, not on my salary, quoth I, hyperextending this and straining that but, mercifully, tearing or breaking nothing. Some of my colleagues found my labours quite amusing, because, I gather, they are minimalists in the matter of book ownership. Inasmuch as the books in my office were overflow from home, I suppose I must qualify as a maximalist, tending to behave in bookstores like a boozier in a brewery. I shall not, however, take twelve steps or make amends for any of it.

The experience of moving the contents of my office did bring a certain enlightenment: I was considerably less than halfway through my labors when it occurred to me that e-books possessed a virtue that I had not appreciated fully theretofore, namely, that they weigh only as much as the gizmo upon which they are read. No wonder librarians admire e-books so much. Clear out those shelves and the unhandy artefacts that have so long sat upon them, load up on e-books, install a plentitude of servers, and pretty soon every library in the world will be the biggest library in the world. No need to re-shelve anything. No need to catalogue. No need to know the alphabet or LC numbers or what to do

with Melvil Dewey's decimals. No more dust allergies. No risk of hernia. Library science lives up to its name, and never mind that the adoption of e-books will add thousands of librarians to the unemployment rolls. Progress necessitates obsolescence, I reckon.

Then, still packing cartons, I began to wonder about the particulars of e-research in e-books. What if I needed to compare, say, five e-sources? Would I have to examine the materials in sequence? Would I need access to five e-readers? Is there a device allowing five e-pages from five e-sources to appear legibly on the same screen at the same time? So many questions. And so few answers, even from young colleagues who, chronology suggested, should know about such things. Indeed, one of them remarked to me (while I was yet hip-deep in books, bubble wrap, and build-'em-yourself cardboard boxes) that it might help to think of those who embrace e-books as members of something resembling a cargo cult.

"Holy cow!" I thought. "John Frum Kindle? A continually anticipated airlift of digital goodies to an expectant and ever-hopeful population?"

What, in point of fact, had I heard about e-books? A great many discouraging things, that's what. An anthropologist told me that e-books don't have page numbers or indices, and that if you wanted to look for something you'd read yesterday, the odds were that you wouldn't be able to find it today. A colleague told me that a book he'd written as a collateral text had been issued as both a paperback and an e-book. The virtue of the e-manifestation apparently lay in the fact that students could download it to all sorts of gizmos, and once they'd read it, they had only to push a button and, poof, it was gone.

(I could see a new student excuse looming on the horizon. I'd already heard—several times—the one about a malfunctioning computer and/or printer, invoked to justify the late arrival of research papers; and I had put it down as a variation on the "dog ate my homework" claim of the desperate fifth grader. But my e-book-writing colleague's remarks brought a fresh variation to mind: "My cat walked across my keyboard while I was reading your book, and it stepped on the delete key, which is why I cannot possibly participate in today's discussion.")

A couple of young colleagues, fearless venturers into the worlds of higher tech, flatly stated that they wanted nothing whatsoever to do with e-books. One of them told me that his publisher reserved the right to decide the format in which his next book would appear, and, at the

moment, he had no idea what the decision might be. He, like every scholar I've heard speak on the subject, would prefer that his work exist as a book on a shelf rather than as digits in the ether. But, technology and economics being what they are, he'll not be consulted.

Alas, and ahah! Hardcover copies of all the books I'd published were on the shelf at home, and I could smell the ink and feel the paper anytime I pleased. Yes, indeed. Geezer pastimes, don't you know.

After I finished packing and moving the books in my office, I turned my attention to the several hundred journals stacked hither and yon. I checked the contents of each one, clipping anything I wanted to save and tossing what remained into the recycle bin. Most of what I examined was as forgotten and irrelevant on the printed page as it would have been in cyberspace. I was in the middle of clipping and tossing when a colleague old enough to know better stuck his head into my office and said, "What are you doing that for? All that stuff is available online."

"Ink and paper," I replied. "The aroma. The only aroma you're going to get is when your motherboard fries."

I'd heard lots of discussion about journals in recent months, most of it involving speculation about how soon they'd *all* become electronic and there'd be no paper copies whatsoever. Not soon enough, in my field. The journal articles had become increasingly tedious, the books being reviewed were even more tedious, and so were the reviews themselves. The trees, the trees. Think of the trees.

After the journals came the file cabinets. Piece of cake, I imagined. The end was in sight. I'd be packed and out of the building before the first I-beam buckled and the acoustical tile introduced itself to the linoleum.

I opened the drawers of the initial cabinet and decided that I might need to invest in some sort of cranial protection device. Maybe the athletic department could send over a spare football helmet.

Worse than that, I was being forced by circumstances to ignore the instruction of first half of Genesis 45:20 to "regard not your stuff." I had to regard a considerable amount of stuff—a veritable ocean of stuff that extended for decades back in time. Old test papers; old research papers; final grade reports; forms of all sorts; permission slips; boilerplate memoranda concerning sensitivity training, conflict of interest, and extramural compensation; grade appeals; carbon copies (!) of forty-year-old letters I'd written; old lecture notes; old research notes; ideas for

manuscripts; abandoned manuscripts; wiring and spare parts for obsolete classroom technologies—you name it, and I probably had it in those file cabinets. Ah, bureaucracy. All I seemed to be missing was a hall pass to the gents', but then I remembered that no administrator had thought of that one yet.

At one point, it occurred to me that I was excavating my career, moving backward through the ages like an archaeologist on a dig. The farther I went, the older the yield: newspaper clippings, old reviews, tear sheets from journals defunct and otherwise. There were thousands of pieces of paper, some to be saved on account of a neat turn of phrase, but most to be sorted for disposal in a) the recycle bin, b) the landfill south of town, or c) the shredder. *Sic transit* and all of that. I had on my hands the makings of a museum exhibit entitled "The Effluvium of Late Twentieth-Century Academia: A Tribute to Paper."

Had all that material been e-ified, I could have hastened the process and merely hit the delete key, and without feline assistance either.

But, as it was, I had found enough material for a couple of books and a collection of essays, and I would as of now be raring to write, except for the situation in scholarly publishing. Yeah, *that* situation. I want ink and paper, but publishers cannot afford to give a rat's patootie what prospective authors want.

And then, *voilà*, it was finished. I had met the deadline for evacuating the building. My former office was as empty as Mother Hubbard's cupboard, my wallet, or a politician's head. My department had been relocated to a sprawling command structure built by the US Navy in 1942. Happily, fire engines were stationed a half-block away. Nevertheless, we were instructed not to keep office hours in the building on account of its distance from the main campus and, I suspect, liability issues.

So, after a few weeks of rest and recuperation from four months of book schlepping, I loaded some academic essentials into the back of my truck and prepared to meet the fall semester of 2011 as if I were planning to assault Mount McKinley. I was hoping against hope that I would not have to search long and hard for an on-campus parking space within hobbling distance of my assigned classrooms. My office hours were by appointment only; and if there were appointments, they were held under a tree or on an available bench, or in a breezeway in the event of inclement weather. "How can we get in touch with you?" students asked. "Come to class. You might as well. Attendance is required, because it's

essential. Otherwise, contact the department, and I'll get your message," I told them. They grumbled. They always do. They want a cell phone number or an email address, and they'd like their professors available to them at all hours of the day or night, as if higher education and social networking were all of a piece.

My colleagues and I had been told that we'd be able to return to our repaired and renovated building in fourteen months, but, given the downside of awarding construction contracts to the lowest bidder, I placed little faith in the estimate. Well, I was ahead of the game anyway, so it did not really matter. I would have had to do all that packing and moving eventually, whenever the economy decided that it could sustain my retirement; but now, the heavy lifting was behind me.

And if indeed we do return to our original digs, my colleagues and I, my plans are made. I shall hold forth in a freshly painted (perhaps) office containing thirteen empty bookcases, five empty file cabinets, and an uncluttered desk, all of which I hope to leave behind before they fill up again. In the meantime, I might even acquire a computer, find somebody to show me how the damn thing works, and order up a few e-books to peruse. By then, of course, the technocrats may be telling us that we have to download into retinal implants.

Remember, in the country of the cyborg, the best-wired man is king.

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'The Transom' is an occasional column intended to invite response. Readers may send letters for possible publication to the Editor, or they may avail themselves of the 'My Turn' column, according to the advice on the journal's submission page. Letters to William W. Savage, Jr. may be addressed to him at the Department of History, University of Oklahoma, Norman, OK 73019 USA.