

## Lost in Cyberspace?

Written by Margaret Evans

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In the Age of the Internet, a columnist can't be too careful of the company she keeps. As a peddler of opinion, it's hard to keep my "product" pure when there are so many competing – and compelling – perspectives, only a mouse click away. Obviously, a certain amount of reading is necessary to forming any opinion worth passing along. But in my case, too much of a good thing can be a *bad* thing. Just when I think I know what I think – about whatever given subject – I stumble upon a deft turn of phrase, an elegant paragraph, a sparkling-fresh line of thought, and there goes the proverbial rug, right out from under me.

I hate when that happens. But I kinda love it, too. Who wants to end up a stodgy old lady who's doffed her thinking cap, never to don it again? Not I. So I continue my explorations in cyberspace with great curiosity and wonder...

But I have to tell you, for those of us who make a hobby (or, in my case, a meager living) out of following our topsy-turvy culture... it's exhausting out there! In the wild, wild west that is the World Wide Web, the quest for truth and justice never ends. It just gets more confusing.

As I've written here before, I am blessed – or maybe cursed? – with an uncanny knack for holding two radically different – even opposite – opinions at the very same time without my having my noggin explode. In fact, that seems to be my default mode. What's much more difficult, for me, than entertaining wildly different perspectives simultaneously, is deciding which one I agree with the most. That's always my goal, and it can be done, but seldom without a

good wrestling match of ideas. You *could* call me wishy-washy. I prefer to call myself... thorough.

I've found this sets me apart from the majority of folks out there reading, writing and commenting online. The citizens of cyberspace are settling ever more happily into "neighborhoods," cozy burghs where they stick to their own kind, fuel their own fires of opinion, and band together in disgust to repel the occasional "troll." It's only natural, I guess – birds of a feather and all that – and I'm not against it in theory.

But in reality... it bores me. In fact, I've grown as bored with the group think/echo-chamber dynamic in cyberspace as I am with it in the Real World. What's more, as I mentioned in my last column, I believe said dynamic in cyberspace is actually *encouraging* said dynamic in the Real World. I find that... discouraging.

Fortunately, for people like me, there are "mixed neighborhoods" on the net, too – exciting outposts of lively conversation whose denizens are bound together only by similar interests and an earnest desire to learn, discuss, share and grow. Far from the mind-numbing, dogmatic sound-bite factories that take up so much real estate on the web, these alternative forums host healthy, spirited debates between people who agree to disagree with civility and mutual respect.

These are my people. I bet they would be yours, too, if only you knew about them... but they are few and far between, and you might not have had the pleasure. So this issue, I thought I would share with you some of my favorite Internet haunts.

### [Big Questions Online](#)

This is a new online magazine published by the John Templeton Foundation, an organization describing itself as, "a philanthropic catalyst for discoveries relating to the Big Questions of human purpose and ultimate reality. We support research on subjects ranging from complexity,

evolution, and infinity to creativity, forgiveness, love, and free will. We encourage civil, informed dialogue among scientists, philosophers, and theologians and between such experts and the public at large, for the purposes of definitional clarity and new insights.”

Last week on BQO – which tags itself with the subhead “Science, Religion, Markets, Morals” – I read articles with the following titles: “Democracy Through Thick and Thin,” “Victorian Conviction, Victorian Tolerance,” “Deepak Chopra’s God 2.0,” and “What Is Reality TV Doing to Us?” I participated in blog discussions about Christopher Hitchens’ cancer, the disappearing middle class, the science of religion, the imperiled future of Christianity, the unhealthiness of the Western diet, and my *favorite* topic, the polarization of America.

If your eyes have just glazed over, BQO might not be your thang. But trust me... if you’re interested in the Big Questions, you have *got* to bookmark this site.

### [On The Fence With Jesus](#)

The name of this blog had me at hello. And when I read the subtitle – “A Skeptical Screenwriter and a Christian Pastor Talk About Faith” – I was permanently hooked. “Fence” is a simple forum run by two guys – Travis, a Baptist minister living in Virginia, and his friend Craig, a “spiritual but not religious” screenwriter living in California. (Yes, such friendships *do* exist, people!) They tend to post one new topic a day – each giving his own take on it – then their small but loyal band of readers chime in for discussion. Regulars include “Alan,” the gay atheist from Australia, “John the Catholic” (who’s actually Baptist), “Charles,” the multiculturalist, and “Chris,” the cheerful pilgrim. The topics for discussion are often current, and can be *very*

touchy, considering the range of readers. Recent issues have included Anne Rice’s defection from Christianity, the death of California’s Prop 8, the issue of inter-faith marriage (a la Chelsea Clinton), and others along those lines. Serious disagreements arise, as you can imagine, but somehow, the Fencers always manage to hash things out with grace, humor, and respect. Somewhere, Jesus must be smiling.

### [Front Porch Republic](#)

This site announces itself with the subhead “Place. Limits. Liberty.” On its “About” page, the

editor elaborates: “We live in a world characterized by a flattened culture and increasingly meaningless freedoms. Little regard is paid to the necessity for those overlapping local and regional groups, communities, and associations that provide a matrix for human flourishing. We’re in a bad way, and the spokesmen and spokeswomen of both our Left and our Right are, for the most part, seriously misguided in their attempts to provide diagnoses, let alone solutions... Though there is plenty we disagree about... the folks gathered here more or less agree with the above assertions. We come from different backgrounds, live in different places, and have divergent interests, but we’re convinced that scale, place, self-government, sustainability, limits, and variety are key terms with which any fruitful debate about our corporate future must contend.”

The writers at FPR tend to be a wee bit erudite for the average reader – many of them are academics – and I often find myself traipsing off to Wikipedia to demystify their references. You can get a great education at FPR, but only if you’ve already got a decent one. This week’s topics included “Civilization and the Sacred,” “The Orphans of Success,” and “How I Ended my 6-Year Relationship with my Blackberry.”

### [Mockingbird](#)

Another small, sparkling jewel of the Internet, Mockingbird is a blog for the cerebral, culture-loving Christian. Run by a bunch of hip young theologians (that’s right, I said “hip young theologians”), the blog’s mission is “to connect the historic truths of the Gospel with the realities of everyday life in as down-to-earth a way as possible.” Far from eschewing “the world,” these savvy believers look to the story-tellers, artists and pop icons of our time to highlight and elucidate timeless truths. They find those truths in the films of Whit Stillman and Disney Pixar... in the music of Elvis, Tom Jones and Johnny Cash... in the arenas of sports and business, in the cartoons of Charles Schulz, TV dramas like “Friday Night Lights,” and sitcoms like “Frazier.” The writers of Mockingbird are so brilliant, so funny, so friendly... it’s not surprising they have a diverse following of believers and unbelievers alike. Warning: If you’re convinced that religion is bogus and/or dull – that it can’t possibly have any relevance in today’s world – and you’d like to maintain that position... you should probably avoid this blog. (Or better yet, show up and treat yourself to a good debate. They’d love to have you!)

C.S. Lewis said, “The man who agrees with us that some question, little regarded by others, is

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of great importance can be our friend. He need not agree with us about the answer.”

How that sentiment resonates with me. I'll bet it resonates with you, too. The websites above (and many others I could list) are proof that we're not alone. The virtual world – like the Real World – is full of petty people pursuing petty interests and petty agendas. But there are also plenty of folks pursuing Big Questions online... bringing big minds and big hearts to the task.

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