

Technology beautiful, yet scary

Merging has always been tough for me.

When I first learned to drive, I would drive on the shoulder of the freeway for 10 full minutes until I could hedge onto the road with not a car in sight.

But that ain't nothing compared to merging onto the big, bad — yet strangely beautiful — information superhighway.

(Ah yes, another writer casting about for tired automobile metaphors to describe the Internet. You just can't get enough, can you, America? CAN YOU?)

I broke down this semester and got myself a free e-mail account. Actually, I don't know if that counts. It hardly makes me a cyberpunk.

Frankly, all I know how to do so far is send and receive mail. Send. Receive. Send. Receive.

Sometimes people will interrupt me while I'm sending and receiving to ask me to "talk." Usually, I just ignore them because the whole talk process confuses me. I've successfully attempted it once. Very late at night. With someone who wanted to talk about Wisconsin.

And that's the beauty of the Internet, you see. You can sit in a computer lab at 2 a.m. and talk to a perfect stranger (who is in turn sitting in another lab ALMOST A MILE AWAY) about Wisconsin.

Someday I will frequent chat rooms, subscribe to news groups, maybe even check the status of a library book, all without leaving my terminal.

Please do not misunderstand. (Please, I beg you, do not misunderstand.) I am amazed, awed even, by all that is possible on the "net."

Perhaps that's the problem. There's almost too much, more than my homely little head can deal with.

And the other part is this: At the tender age of 22, in the springtime of my womanhood, I have become an old fogey. I marvel at the new



Rainbow Rowell

"Hmmm," she would say, thoughtfully examining the clouds or lack of them, or maybe just spacing off in the direction of the Chi Omega house. "Looks cold." Or "Looks warm." Or occasionally, "Looks weird."

and improved like that guy with the Coke bottle in "The Gods Must Be Crazy."

Even lesser technology makes me "oooh" and "ahhhh." Take "The Weather Channel," for example.

For the first half of the semester my roommate DeDra and I conducted a pathetically unsophisticated weather ritual.

I would wake up (usually, if I had successfully deciphered my alarm clock the night before) and look out the window from my bed.

"What's it supposed to be like today?" I would ask DeDra.

She, too, would turn to the window.

"Hmmm," she would say, thoughtfully examining the clouds or lack of them, or maybe just spacing off in the direction of the

Chi Omega house. "Looks cold." Or "Looks warm." Or occasionally, "Looks weird."

I would stare at the air, analyze the color of the sky and take note whether the trees were blowing. Then, inevitably, I would agree.

And, inevitably, we would both be wrong and inappropriately dressed. We would whine when forced to carry our sweaters, complain while shivering in our T-shirts.

We would raise our fists and curse the heavens. What must we do to appease them?

Then, one morning, I turned to DeDra (as I'm wont to do) and asked the inevitable: "What's it supposed to be like today?"

But rather than turn to the window, DeDra did something funny. She said, "You know, we could always check 'The Weather Channel.'"

It was quiet for a moment as we absorbed the comment. In awe — for what a perfect solution this was — and also feeling pretty stupid. Why the heck had that not occurred to either of us until the end of October?

For the same reason that I ignore that little beeping sound on my computer rather than figure out how to "chat" with someone. For the same reason that I walk to the library rather than just logging on to the computer down the hall to check the status of a book.

I'm not incapable — just stubborn, and heavy with distrust. Snappy graphics and theme music, be damned! I prefer mine own eyes. And I'm not the only one.

Last week, I woke up and asked DeDra about the weather.

"Looks cold," she said.

I took a peek out the window.

"Yup, looks cold."

Rowell is a senior news-editorial, advertising and English major and Daily Nebraskan managing editor.

Our special guest

John Fulwider

Homeless man proves stereotypes wrong

Lincoln's homeless deserve a fair shake. They deserve some friends.

A year ago yesterday, a human being died in the south vestibule of Nebraska Union.

Some wouldn't think of him as a human being. Many would have preferred to ignore him and go about their business.

David Ball, 47, a man of spectacular kindness and intelligence, was homeless. He died alone, huddled in the only warm place he could find on a cold fall morning. None of his family or friends were present to mourn his passing.

But I mourned his passing. An icy fist gripped my heart when I picked up the Monday, Nov. 7, 1994 edition of the Daily Nebraskan. The headline was in the upper-left corner: "Homeless man dies in Union."

The outside doors to the south vestibule (where the NBC Bank ATM machine is) are left unlocked all night. David probably went there to seek refuge from the weather. The coroner's report said he died of natural causes at 4 a.m.

I'll never forget David. I'd be lying if I said I knew him well; but I knew him well enough to know that he deserved a lot more than what life dealt him.

This was a man who, on a rainy day, offered me his umbrella because I didn't have one. David told me he took broken umbrellas from the trash, fixed them, and gave them to friends.

One day just before lunch, when I told him I was hungry, he offered me some crackers and peanut butter.

He was a man who deserved a lot more than he had.

He used to sit on the north side of the Crib, at a two-seat table against the wall closest to the water fountain.

He was a tall, thin man. He had long, salt-and-pepper hair and a goatee. His skin was stretched taut across his prominent cheekbones. His chin jutted out. And his eyes sparkled with intelligence, and knowledge built up from years of reading discarded books, magazines and newspapers.

He always had an overstuffed yellow Nebraska Bookstore bag with him, along with a backpack.

And at least one of those umbrellas he found and fixed. David seemed always prepared for hunger or the weather. He probably had about 200 packs of saltine crackers somewhere in that big yellow bag.

He wore layers upon layers of clothes — he certainly had space in those huge bags of his to store a complete wardrobe. What he couldn't fit in his bags, he kept in a coin-operated locker by University Bookstore.

During his years sitting at his table in the Union, David touched other lives, as well.

In a letter to the editor on Nov. 15, 1994, Carly Cardaronella, then a junior psychology major, wrote about her friend:

"David Ball had been a

smiling face and a friend in my life for a couple of years now. I will never forget each time I went to the Union to study, stressed out over tests and papers, and David was there with a friendly 'How ya' doing?' and a sincere interest in what was going on in my life.

"I would share my interests with him and he with me ... This proud man was no beggar. He was a man whose life was filled with one unfortunate occurrence after another. Because of him, I will never pass judgment on another homeless or less fortunate person."

Some less generous souls have no qualms about passing judgment on the homeless. One sophomore student wrote a particularly venomous letter this semester.

He sarcastically described the Union as a place for the homeless to go and watch television while they do nothing all day long.

The building's vending and arcade machines, he wrote, were places to scrounge for change. And the trash cans provided three complimentary meals a day.

That student's letter proves he never knew David. No one could spite David — I certainly never heard him utter an unkind word or saw him raise his fist in anger.

There are some less-than-pleasant homeless people around Lincoln; some of them even frequent the Union. But we're surrounded by unpleasant people everywhere; I've had some of them for professors.

It may just irk some people to death, but the homeless — pleasant and unpleasant — have a right to be in the Union. Our beloved university is a land-grant institution — open to the public. Just as a student from Lincoln High School can come in the Union during its normal business hours and play a video game, so can any homeless person come in, sit on a couch, and watch TV. Or collect aluminum cans, as some industrious people have chosen to do.

I feel sorry for those who weren't around UNL during the fall semester of 1994, and before. They missed a chance to meet a unique man, full of character and overflowing with love.

David proved beyond a doubt that stereotypes of homeless people don't fit. He proved that there's more to a person than where they live, or what they choose to do with their time.

Lincoln's homeless deserve a fair shake. They deserve some friends.

Take a chance, step out of your comfort zone, and strike up a conversation with that person you pass every day. You may be pleasantly surprised by the human being hidden behind your prejudices.

And David — rest in peace. I miss you.

Fulwider is a sophomore news-editorial major and a Daily Nebraskan senior reporter.

Doin' time in a universal mind

When I was a kid, around fourth grade, I realized my teachers were all washed up.

It was science class. We were studying soil — specifically, erosion.

"There are two kinds of erosion," Miss Johnston said, "Natural and man-made."

I raised my hand.

"You mean if a deer makes a path that causes erosion it's natural — but if a person makes a path that causes erosion it's not?"

I had an analytic mind, in those days.

Teacher agreed. "That's correct," she said — and I suddenly knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that grown-ups had no clue what's real and what's not.

They still don't. Most of them don't.

People are nature, nature made people. We are part of this big old world and we have a place in it, and a role to play.

As George Carlin says, I think people are here because nature needs plastics.

Or something like that. Maybe Carlin's just trying to be funny, but he's got a point.

People are nature, but with a catch.

People are nature personified.

Think of it this way:

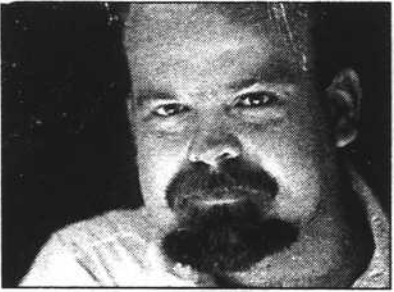
Nature is alive; from a certain point of view all creatures are part of one very big process.

In the sea, the planet breathes — one long breath swinging from oxygen to carbon dioxide and back to oxygen again. Waste products arise and are turned into nutrients by automatic processes that we have only begun to understand.

Hardly anything is produced that is not food for something else — one man's poison and all that.

People, scientists, like to point out that nature is blind, purposeless, amoral. But it just isn't so. Maybe it was, once, but not any more.

Because we are here.



Mark Baldrige

"People are nature, but with a catch. People are nature personified."

In my own body there are automatic processes that are blind, purposeless and amoral. But that doesn't apply to me, to what I call myself.

I hunger and thirst — for cheeseburgers and pop, sure, but also after righteousness.

I eat and digest and, well, you know the rest — all without lifting a mental finger.

But somewhere in the gestalt that is me, consciousness arises. From the soup of my own body I boil up — far-sighted, purposeful and moral.

And I am part of nature. In me, nature finds purpose and a moral center. In me, in all of us.

We are the brains of this outfit called earth.

Not all of nature is sentient, but we are.

And, from that "certain point of view," it's not just little, old you and little, old me that's sentient.

I suspect there might be such a thing as a "meta-consciousness" — a "mind" that contains all the communications of human beings as it's principal ground.

A mind which is thinking what we're talking about — and our talk is only part of its thinking mecha-

nism.

I don't mean anything magical here — though I guess I'm not exactly talking science either.

But if it's true — if nature is a mind whose thoughts consist of all human discourse over time, then nature just got a lot smarter.

Wasn't the printing press just invented yesterday?

And, like the neurotransmitters in your own head, it enables that mind which is human history to remember and transfer information with much greater accuracy.

In just the last few seconds, historically speaking, communications technology has rewired the brain of the world — hooked up different parts of that mind in new, exciting ways.

It now thinks faster and carries more information around than ever before.

The next step, as I see it, will be self awareness. The meta-mind I'm talking about doesn't seem to know it exists.

Yet.

But the idea is dawning. And by writing this down for you to read I participate in that dawning self-awareness.

The mind that is us all, that will outlive us as we outlive our individual neurons, is stirring on this campus, and in many other places, as people come to think of things from "a certain point of view."

From another point of view, of course, everything I'm saying is nonsense.

From that point of view nature is just a whole lot of automatic feedback loops involving complex organizations of materials we call "life forms" — for lack of a better word.

It is blind and predictable in terms of stimulus/response.

From that point of view, of course, so are you.

Baldrige is a senior English major and Opinion editor for the Daily Nebraskan.