

BEYOND THE CLASSROOM

Is our society heading toward a new intellectual dark age?

Laurie Futterman Staff Writer

PUBLICATION: Miami Herald, The (FL) DATE: August 28, 2016

In the Dark Ages - which began with barbarians driving Roman civilization from Europe - long nights were filled with rumor, storytelling, and idle fancies flowing through a fact-impooverished world....

Our world today is unsustainable. There are more users than there are makers, more consumers than there are growers, and more players than there are thinkers. A Reddit.com post, Can modern technology prevent another "Dark Ages" from ever happening again? suggests that we are in more danger of societal collapse today than hundreds of years ago or more. Why? Because of the high degree of specialization we have created and how far removed we have become from making the very things we depend upon.

Nearly everything we rely on today defies our ability to recreate it - without an enormous external support system. Would it be possible to make a pencil if the import/exporters and manufacturers stopped delivering the necessary components? In the past, there was some proximate knowledge about how to make things. The great majority of us do not possess that information and would probably have to resort to scratching rocks with other rocks.

Darkness

The Dark Ages, as part of the Early Middle Ages of European civilization (500- 1300 AD), symbolizes the demographic, cultural and economic deterioration that occurred following the decline of the Roman Empire. The reference to "darkness" characterizes the relative lack of written records that leaves a historical void. It also contrasts this period of relative intellectual darkness that occurred between the fall of the Roman Empire - after the end of Late Antiquity, and the eventual rise of the Italian Renaissance in the 14th century.

A new dark age?

Liam Fox, in his Telegraph article We're in danger of entering a new Dark Age, says that by forgetting what made us who we are, we risk losing the achievements of the Renaissance - and the periods of Enlightenment and Reason that followed.

Fox says that since these periods of awakening, humanity has transformed the world. Despite wars and violence, we excelled in literature, art, music, science and medicine. We have expanded the rule of democratic systems and have alleviated more physical poverty in our own generation than in the whole of history. Yet it appears that we are now confronting a crisis of confidence and complacency. The Age of Reason is in danger of shifting backwards, while the culture of "whatever" - is on the rise.

Loss of Enlightenment

Many suggest that the celebrity cult (how many followers do the Kardashians have?), the decline in serious learning, and social attitudes on the verge of "valuephobia," all threaten to undermine the pillars of thinking and reasoning. Many people today believe that the validity of their views is determined by the strength with which they hold them, instead of any pragmatic reference.

Few would argue that media celebrities and their antics are now far more glorified than individuals of serious accomplishment or social contribution. Hence the fact that professional sports figures and movie stars often earn 100 times more than farmers, teachers, musicians, researchers or carpenters. When I ask my students about the careers or endeavors they might pursue - most will respond with those that offer high salaries, rather than those of interest or passion. The majority of kids today just want to be rich.

In his article, Is a New Dark Age at Hand?, Lawrence Murray links the role of the internet and smart devices and the plethora of information they provide - not to further enlightenment and learning, but to an age of gossip, rumor, and slanted information. He says this deluge of information is not making us smarter, it is ushering us into a new Dark Age - of superficiality and narcissism.

We accept this transformation without hesitation for we are no longer expected to use our brain. Compared to antiquity, where one was expected to listen and read - where knowledge was the foundation of a thinking mind - he says we no longer need to seek out knowledge - we need only to power a search engine with a few words, even when they're spelled incorrectly.

Thinking

In the Dark Ages, continuous war and upheaval eroded education for many. Knowledge of skills and arts were preserved in monasteries and in universities - where Greek and Arabic scientists experimented on the nature of light and block printing.

In *Entering a Dark Age of Innovation*, Robert Adler suggests we are in the midst of a technological golden age - an invention arises to meet every whim. Yet according to Naval Air Warfare physicist Jonathan Huebner, rather than growing exponentially, or even keeping pace with population growth, significant innovations peaked in 1873 - and have been declining ever since. This finding also parallels the number of US patents granted/decade/national population - the graph peaked in 1915.

Changing Values

Our leisure time has changed. The phonograph brought music into every house. But then it became easier to listen to a master than to learn and practice an instrument ourselves. Listening replaced performance. Where music apps and downloads are readily available for the gen pop, only a handful of students play instruments and write music.

TV once brought imagination into the living room - and now, with over 400 TV channels to choose from, most offer thoughtless entertainment, trivia and - consumerism. Dialogue movies are disappearing. Today's films contain fewer words than silent films had in their title cards. Violent action is the big seller. My students will choose *Deadpool* over *Dead Poets Society* any day.

Sports and free play were a rite of passage for most kids. Today, with parent's hectic schedules, TV and game consoles have all but consumed their afternoons - time once devoted to stickball, bike riding, roller-skating or burying treasure in empty lots.

Our romance with books has faded. Gone are the corner book stores where you could sit on a couch drink coffee and read. Game buttons, remotes, and Internet clicks have trained us to skip and jump - rather than quietly turn pages on a cozy chair. Are we at the point of Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*? - not yet. But the written word is close to becoming a museum piece.

No longer do we sit and talk with our friends. Our lives are over-scheduled, so when we get a minute, we sit alone - with our phones and get or post updates on Facebook.

In his Huffpost article, *A New Dark Age*, Joergen Oerstroem suggests that the social networking forum may actually serve to fracture our society rather than unite it. While social networking seems to promote understanding and empathy, it is also used to foster communication between those of similar culture and values. In doing this, non-compromising "we" are right and "they" are wrong attitudes are reinforced.

Prevention

We have so much stuff, we are destined to become a species of technological scavenging if we do not understand how to make some of these things ourselves. After all, how will a country of 300 million inhabitants support itself when most of our youth today know nothing about MAKING things, FIXING things or GROWING things. Technology should enhance knowledge - it certainly shouldn't replace it.

These changes are insidious but they are ever-present. Right here, right now. And only the family unit can intervene. Because the malaise begins at home.

Start reading books about people and real events. Talk about them. Start making things. Start growing things.

And if you cant do these yourself, embrace your community resources like Home Depot's children's workshops, the Maker Faires or Fairchild Tropical Gardens. Take your kids to a symphony, take a sewing class, go to an art museum or an art show. Start a neighborhood book club. Relish that which is the enlightened human.

Laurie Futterman ARNP is a former Heart Transplant Coordinator at Jackson Memorial Medical Center. She now chairs the science department and teaches gifted middle school science at David Lawrence Jr. K-8 Center. She has three children and lives in North Miami.