

WHATEVER HAPPENED TO VIRTUALLY USELESS?

Here is a sad little story. Two years ago, after witnessing the rise and fall of several Internet forums, I arrived at what I was convinced would be a sure-fire formula. Offered technical assistance by a virtual friend, I ultimately sent out the following invitation:

THE VIRTUALLY USELESS FORUM

This is an invitation to join Virtually Useless, an unmoderated forum with a selected list of subscribers whose purpose is the dissemination of neglected literature. You have been identified as a writer whose work gives pleasure of some sort, be it intellectual, emotional, formal, or humorous. If you are not a successful (i.e. saleable) author, you may have experienced the frustrations of a glutted market. Even if you are established, you probably have a file of work which is so obscure, uncompromising or outrageous as to be unmarketable. Other little favorites of yours may have surfaced briefly and then sunk without a trace.

The Virtually Useless Forum exists solely for the purpose of giving pleasure. For a writer, this usually consists of putting one's work before an appreciative audience and, if one is of a generous disposition, sharing in such pleasure when experienced by others. Members submit as much as they like (within reason), or as little, while maintaining a standard which they would not be ashamed to see in print.

The model for this experiment is my own experience with artists' and writers' colonies, both geographic and virtual. I grew up in Provincetown on Cape Cod during the 30s and 40s and experienced the stimulation of having as next-door neighbors people whom I would later find myself studying at college. Later at KPFA, the listener-sponsored radio station in Berkeley, I felt again the excitement of an intellectual and artistic community, but this time spread out over many miles and bound together by our voices on the air.

And now the Internet extends this possible community to infinity. But we in Virtually Useless will try to retain the next-door-neighbor relationship of the art colony. The object is to maintain the anarchic freedom, coupled with common interests and high standards, which make such communities work. You will be free to introduce others in turn; but please don't invite as a favor anyone whose writing you don't genuinely enjoy. There is no profit or prestige here. We are not even preaching to the choir; we are preaching to the preachers. If the circle were to grow too large, we should consider splitting into smaller groups, though human perversity may accomplish this without conscious effort.

Perhaps such a formless project has no hope of survival. It doesn't matter. There may be hundreds or even thousands of such forums in existence, composed of the best minds of our generation. Good. This particular forum will be a success if our habitual reaction is, "Ah! Another posting from Virtually Useless!"

If you elect to join us, you may either introduce yourself or remain amorphous. If you wish to respond to the submissions of others, experience with other forums suggests that negative responses should go to the author rather than to the entire list. Since some of us have to earn our living by our wits, contributions should only be circulated outside the forum when the

author explicitly permits it. But the most important rule of all is: Entertain us, and be entertained in return

For the forum,

John Whiting
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London

HOW TO ACCEPT THIS INVITATION

Send an untitled message to majordomo@swia.com
containing the single line subscribe useless-l

Your request will be received by a real human who will complete the subscription process, after which a welcome message will confirm your enrollment and contain pertinent administrivia.

The response was gratifying. I wrote a postscript which went out with subsequent invitations:

The Virtually Useless Forum is now online. List members include Charles Shere, (composer, critic, gastronome), Bob Bertolf (curator of the U. of Buffalo poetry archive), Dale Carter (American Lit prof, University of Aarhus), Richard Ehrlich (London food writer), Joe Elliott (ex Nam fighter pilot and a natural journalist with a tough, comic style – in the old days he'd be syndicated rather than cooling his heels on a pension), Rolf Gehlhaar (composer, electroacoustic inventor, ex-Stockhausen PA), Michael Hrebaniak (a fellow-editor of Radical Poetics and lecturer in cultural studies at the Royal Academy of Music), Matthew Lasar (KPFA historian), Richard Moore (an authority on cyber rights), William Rowe (Latin American Lit prof, King's College, London), Maxwell Steer (London music critic, journalist), Larry Tunsta (former KPFA folk music programmer and astute historian & critic of public radio), Harvey Wheeler (you may remember his name from the Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions, Santa Barbara; he is, among other things, a world authority on Francis Bacon), David Josephson (another high-class ex KPFAer, now a designer and manufacturer of some of the world's best microphones), & my fellow-host, (Dr.) Bill Paterson (a down-sized aeronautical scientist of wide interests and more time than a man of his abilities should have). Bill's son is providing the technical facilities.

Your name would be an honored addition to the roster.

John Whiting

I began writing regularly for the list and received regular encouragement. A couple of members also submitted articles for comment in advance of publication. But most never

submitted a blessed word; they sat there in silence. The list became dormant. Occasionally one of the regulars (there are now only three of us) submits a posting, but without inspiring comment.

The members have not actually gone away. They haven't taken their names off the list. There have been no on-line slanging matches. The list just doesn't seem to be useful or interesting to those who expressed an initial interest. For all intents and purposes, they're like nominal parish members of the Church of England, except that they don't even show up at Easter and Christmas.

I had hoped that this could be a hospitable shelter from the urgent postings demanding immediate attention to yet another world crisis. Is the missionary instinct what keeps internet communication going? Perhaps it is lost without it.

John Whiting
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