

Foreword to “Islands in the Clickstream”

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One of the perks of being a magazine editor is that book publishers send me free copies of their latest releases, hoping I'll publish a review. Since my magazine focuses on computer and Internet security--the hot topic of the day--there's no shortage of titles to choose from. As I write this foreword, there's at least 10 Syngress titles on my bookshelf, ranging from “Building DMZs for Enterprise Networks” to “Ethereal Packet Sniffing” to “Security Assessment: Case Studies for Implementing the NSA IAM.”

These are all fine books, mind you. Each is chock-full of important information that helps technology professionals do their jobs better. The problem is that you may see Syngress on the spine of this book and assume it belongs with the others.

This book will not help you improve your job performance. It will, however, improve your life performance.

On the surface, this book is a selection of Richard Thieme's “Islands in the Clickstream” essays, 144 in all, originally published on the Web between late 1996 and spring 2004. But that's only what this book *is*. It's not what this book is *about*.

This book is about the complex interrelationship between humans and technology: how you interact with computers, how the Internet influences how you learn and perceive reality, and how technology both helps and distracts you from knowing thyself.

This book is about power and knowledge, insight and inspiration, culture and experience, physics and metaphysics. Like space and time, there are multiple dimensions to this book. I'll wager you've never read anything quite like it.

The first essay in this book was written in December 1997. It's called “Ferg's Law,” which simply states: “When everything can go right, it will, and at the best possible moment.” This is more than an optimist's overhaul of Moore's Law. It's a prophecy fulfilled as the pages of the essay--and the book--unfold.

“Ferg's Law” is about a scuba diving trip Richard took off the coast of Maui, a dive that took him out far beyond the stability of land and its creature comforts. At one point in the dive, Richard swims past the edge of the coral reef, where the sea bottom drops off dramatically. As he floats in liquid nothingness, something unexpectedly moves near him, something large and dark and unknowable. It is there, at the edge of his perception, and then just as quickly it disappears into the blackness.

The experience is akin to Sartre's description of spiritual nausea, a feeling of existential angst. Only when Richard has retreated to the safety of the reef does he regain his sense of self.

In many ways, this story is a metaphor for the rest of the book. Richard is an edge-dweller. Throughout these essays, he carries us center-dwellers to the precipice and forces us to see what's there in the inscrutable darkness. What he reveals is a glimpse of the “unknown possibilities...the invitation of life itself.” He then brings us back to safety, flush with insight into the wonders that lay beyond.

So you may ask, “What does this have to do with technology?” The answer is: everything. Technology is a medium that continually expands our notion of “limits.”

Richard once wrote an article for *Information Security* on the topic of “wearables.” In this piece he suggested that our reliance on technology has become so pervasive that we’ll soon be wearing clothing and eyeglasses and shoes all connected into one great computer network. In fact, it won’t be long, he argued, before we all have surgically implanted computer chips guiding how we interact with the world: how we see and learn and shop and drive and experience...and exist.

In “Field of Subjectivity,” Richard tells the story about a man who already embodies this futuristic reality, a quadriplegic with a brain implant that allows him to move a computer screen cursor with thought. In these and other stories in this book, “the network that is the computer is linked to the human network.... A complex pattern of energy and information, life blurs at the edges into its raw materials.”

Carbon and silicon, inextricably entwined. The only difference is the interface.

Much of this book is about the relationship between content and context, which Richard argues is ultimately the same thing. Caveat lector: some of this content is heavy lifting, not because the text is inaccessible but because it pushes us into unfamiliar territory, forcing us to consider new realities and new ways of thinking.

I mention these things not to scare you away but to entice you further. During her lifetime, Emily Dickinson wrote more than 1,800 poems. Because she rarely ventured out of the confines of her small room in Amherst, Mass., her poetry reads like a diary, an intense survey of the landscape of her mind. Many of the essays in this book have the same character and quality. Unlike Dickinson, Richard is a world traveler. But his writing is similarly personal and undeniably human in its exploration of inner space.

As for the context, that’s where the action is: the point of departure between what Richard writes and what it ultimately means to you. I tell you this: If you approach this book like a miner—digging deep, taking your time—you will discover a wealth of gold. Nuggets of wisdom surface in every story, for Richard is a master at aphorisms. Here are a few of my favorites:

“Cyberspace is ‘space’ indeed, brimful of gods and goddesses, angels and demons waiting to become flesh. That’s neither good nor bad, it’s just what’s so.” –“The Voice of the Computer”

“The seed contains the tree. The seed knows from the moment of germination where it is headed. It may twist in response to drought or food, but [it] knows how to become the mature tree. And we know how to become who we already are.” –“Detours”

“Identity is destiny. Our task is to name ourselves, and we will, once we know who we are.... We are who we think we are, but we can always—with a mere word—transform who we think we were into who we choose to be.” –“A Model for Managing Multiple Selves”

“The older I get, the more obvious it is that those who think they have a clue do not have a clue, and those who know they do not have a clue have a shot at having a clue.” –A Miracle by Any Other Name

“Technology has defined cultures and shaped behaviors forever. The technologies that evolved out of organic molecules, we call ‘nature.’ Those that we made, we call ‘culture.’ Both kinds are melting into a gray area we don’t know how to define.” –“The Simple Truth”

Richard also is a raconteur, and his all-too-infrequent yarns are the best parts of this book. Some stories are long, woven throughout the essay; others are short vignettes that punctuate an insight or observation. In all cases, Richard’s narration provides glimpses of the grace and beauty of everyday experience.

There’s the story about his days as an Episcopal priest, rallying his congregation to engage in a special event; about his interaction with young computer enthusiasts (a.k.a. hackers) at the DefCon and Black Hat conferences; about stargazing at his uncle’s farm in Indiana; about sipping latte in a coffee shop with his son, gazing out onto the darkening woods beyond the Milwaukee River.

These stories are “visionary”--vestiges of Richard’s memory and past experience that, in the act of retelling, transport us into timeless moments of intense clarity. In this way, Richard’s content becomes our context.

I’m not embarrassed to admit that two stories actually brought me to tears. Both concerned “near-misses” with Richard’s family. The first, “The Simple Truth,” is about his wife’s diagnosis with breast cancer. The second, “A Miracle by Any Other Name,” is about how his son survived a near-fatal motorcycle accident.

Exactly what happens in these stories I’ll let you discover on your own. What I’m concerned about here is context. Richard writes with grace and humility in these stories; he is clearly awed by the way that life spontaneously gives, and then takes away, and then gives again.

The first time I read these stories, particularly “Miracle,” I was enveloped in raw emotion. I ceased to be a “reader,” a passive receptacle into which Richard poured his words. I was with him. I was a spiritual participant in his experience. If you read this book deeply and with an open mind, the same thing will happen to you.

One sentence from “Miracle” had particular significance for me. After reading it the first time, I scribbled it down on a piece of paper and taped it to my computer monitor, where it remains today:

“Even in normal, mundane life, compassion and generosity of spirit are the glue of the universe.”

This is Ferg’s Law, expressed not as a concept, but as an imperative. But for me, it’s more than that. It’s Thieme’s Theme, a living symbol of “the human dimension of technology.”

As I work, there it is, a simple scribble affixed to the edge of my computer, out of focus but never out of sight. I do believe it improves my life performance.

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