



BOOK REVIEW

***Extraordinary Lives: Disability and Destiny in a Technological Age*, by Steve Talbott (The Nature Institute: 2003)**

Extraordinary Lives – Extraordinary Book

Lowell Monke

Long time subscribers of Steve Talbott's on-line journal, *Netfuture*, know that he is one of the deepest thinkers about the human-technology relationship writing today. A friend once told me that every time he reads one of Talbott's essays he feels like he has been gently awakened from a sleep he didn't realize he had fallen into.

This is, I think, Talbott's intention – to help us wake up from our daily sleep-walk through the thoroughly machine-mediated environment in which we live. A beautiful example of this is *Extraordinary Lives: Disability and Destiny in a Technological Age*, a small but profound meditation crafted around two *Netfuture* essays that focus on human disabilities and the "promise" of genetic engineering.

The essays are essentially reviews of two books: Jacques Lusseyran's autobiography, *And Then There Was Light* and *Expecting Adam*, by Martha Beck. The stories recounted from these books are fascinating and Talbott gives enough details to draw us into the lives of the remarkable people involved.

The real purpose of *Extraordinary Lives*, however, is to lead us from these stories to another one: the story of the role that technology plays in the meaning we give (or deny) to those with handicaps. As

he notes early in the book,

Today we are strongly inclined to technologize every disability, conceiving it as wholly defined by a specific malfunction of a piece of machinery, and immediately setting about the task of "fixing" the malfunction, as if that were the whole story.

Much of *Extraordinary Lives* is dedicated to showing just how much is left out of that technological story. Lusseyran lost his eyesight at age seven, yet nevertheless led a French resistance group during World War II, survived the horrors of Buchenwald concentration camp and eventually developed an ability to "see" without his eyes. Martha Beck was a PhD candidate at MIT when she became pregnant with a child with Downs Syndrome. After rejecting counsels to abort the fetus, she eventually discovered a sort of mystical connection with her son, a connection that transformed her life in wondrous ways that her deadly rational colleagues could not begin to fathom.

After pondering the mysterious capacities of human life that often are revealed only through the loss of normal abilities, Talbott turns to the genetic engineers and theorists searching for the power to control and "fix" those capacities. What he finds (hopefully at the extreme fringe of this profession) varies

from banal to morally repugnant. To give but one example: In contrast to the gratitude expressed by Beck for a life graced by her handicapped son, philosopher Gregory Pence looks at reproduction with the flinty eye of the hard-to-please consumer. In his book *Who's Afraid of Human Cloning*, Pence asks, "Would it be so terrible to allow parents to at least aim for a certain type [of child], in the same way that great breeders match a breed of dog to the needs of a family?"

If you are like me, you probably find it difficult to even respond to such questions with anything other than dumbfounded incredulity. This is why Talbott's voice is so valuable. He finds the words to express what many of us can only feel, so stuck are we with the vocabulary imposed by the technological worldview. Here are just a few of those words:

Read those quotations about genetic engineering a few more times, and pay attention to the inner gesture that seems to animate the words. I suspect that you will notice a certain brittleness and superficiality, a play of logic without any profound wrestling with the meaning of the terms employed. And along with this goes the arrogance that always seems to follow when the force of logic is mistaken for depth of understanding. It is texts like these that convince me most fearfully of the possibilities for reducing ourselves to computational machines.

Careful readers of this passage will note a central theme that appears in all of Talbott's writings, that the problem is not the machines around us so much as our own increasingly machine-like thinking. Thus, he refuses to let us off the hook by simply proclaiming that genetic engineering (or any other technology) should be prohibited. It really is how we use these ever more powerful tools that matters, but how we use them must be guided by an ever deepening, ever expanding understanding of what it means to be human. Unfortunately, what we are witnessing in much of science today is a narrowing, a shrinking down of that meaning to nothing more than arrangements of molecules in cells.

In the last chapter of the book, Talbott reveals a bit of his own struggle with this mentality and provides, I think, a much needed mirror for many of us to look into. He recounts a visit to the Camphill

Village in Copake, New York, where people with a wide variety of mental handicaps live and work. At the beginning of the chapter Talbott offers this extraordinary observation: "If there is a place that can bring healing to a high-tech society, surely this is it." In a sense, the whole book is an argument for the validity of that statement. That argument is made well enough that when, in the final sentence he writes, "My own inclination, in trying to glimpse a tolerable social future, would be to look at least as hard at what is going on in a Camphill village as to look at the excitements of Silicon Valley," I found myself nodding in agreement.

For those of us in the field of education, there are profound inferences to be drawn from this little book. Talbott himself points to a few. Noting that the Camphill staff meetings parallel the way Waldorf teaching staffs meet to analyze and discuss the progress and problems of particular students, he draws a contrast with standardized testing's technological solution to evaluation.

Certainly teachers *must* assess student performance – and in the most profound and intimate way possible. The problem with standardized testing is that it *avoids* any rigorous assessment. . . . When you know in advance exactly what knowledge the student-container is supposed to hold, there's not much incentive to attend to the particular gifts and developmental needs, or the consuming interests, of the individual learner. Standardized testing is not student assessment; it is the refusal to assess.

If you stop and think back for just a moment, it is not difficult to recognize the same thinking at work behind standardized testing as that which lurks behind genetic breeding of children. It is the same technological ideology that has been used to justify the indiscriminate infusion of computers into every level of education in the U.S. It is the thinking that causes us, as Talbott accurately observes, "[to] begin by talking about 'what the computer can do' rather than by asking, 'Who is this child, and what, in his deepest self, is he asking from us?'"

To not ask that question daily in our encounters with children, whether in school or out, is to be sickened by the virus of machine thinking that Talbott consistently draws to our attention. Reading *Extraordinary Lives* provides a much need-

ed dose of antibiotic for the recurring mechanistic flu from which we all, to varying degrees, suffer.

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Extraordinary Lives is available from The Nature Institute, 169 Route 21C, Ghent, New York 12075.

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