

Zeus poems revealed a great soul's inner life

It seems like a long-forgotten age, but it was only yesterday, relatively speaking, when most of us lived our lives as closed books. Now we spontaneously twitter, offer ready opinions on blogs, reveal facts about our lives and our loved ones on Facebook. We need to be LinkedIn. We use online dating services to weed through prospective significant others. We risk our lives and the lives of others texting while driving. We even get our souls straight with God via online church worship and counseling services.

It is hard to remember when a cartoon or newspaper clipping taped to an office door was a rare portal into the heart and mind of its occupant. Affixing personal handwritten or typewritten thoughts to a door was a radical act of revelation.

What is the cut-off age for feeling uneasy about the openness that our electronic information technology has introduced? The source code for the World Wide Web was released into the public domain in 1991. By 2001, our National Security Agency began warrantless collection of our already voluminous email and Internet usage records, a practice the NSA continues in modified ways. Yet most of us are not concerned.

When was the sea change in how we feel about protecting what we think and say? How old do we have to be to worry about how we now communicate?

Even setting aside whether privacy of communication protects who we are and whether monitoring inhibits how we relate to others, the new openness seems to diminish the personal pleasure of discovering what is unique in other people.

We now tell all to everyone. We used to tell little to a precious few. But that little was a precious little.

These concerns come together when we use writing as therapy, as a way of probing and uncovering our deepest feelings and innermost thoughts, as a means of getting things off our chests once we identify, through introspection, what is on our chests. The power of psychiatric therapy stems from confiding in a trustworthy, sympathetic, informed and expert other or small group of others. We once singled out and confided in friends, loved ones, fellow workers using the same criteria.

My colleague at the University of Texas at Austin, James Pennebaker, pioneered 30 years ago a therapy now

known as expressive writing. It encourages individuals to recall, explore, bring together, and write about their deepest positive and negative emotions and later to process what they have written. Pennebaker affirms that an important factor is that "participants believe that their writing is taken seriously, is held in confidence, and will have no adverse social effects on them."

In the old paradigm, the colleagues who placed thoughts on their doors were revealing their inner selves in a guarded way: Their doors protected them from thoughtless spontaneous responses. But the thoughts on their doors made us aware of who they were and what issues of the day interested, worried or delighted them.

I have been brought to these thoughts of mine by memories of a dearly departed colleague, Douglass S. Parker, who taught at UT-Austin for nearly 40 years. Douglass died at age 83, early in 2011. He was a brilliant and influential translator of Greek and Roman comedy and the one professor on our distinguished faculty whom I long advised students to take a course from before they graduated.

Douglass himself said he was a "jazz improvisationalist trapped in a classicist's body," "an itinerant trombonist who took a wrong turn in 1946," when he began serious study of Greek and Latin literature. He taught students about imaginary worlds conceived by great minds from Homer and Dante to Tolkien.

His own imaginative powers were prodigious. Austin's stellar jazz trombonist Jon Blondell, himself now ill, recalled Douglass to me as "that UT prof who really had chops."

From 1979 to 1993, Douglass posted poems on his door that record what the supreme Greek god Zeus said about his life in imagined therapy sessions. At the time, I was too young and career-focused to grasp that Douglass was revealing his soul to us. Such profound insight into the human condition often comes from going through troubles in life.

Douglass's 52 poems of inventive genius have been lovingly collected and edited. They will be performed by Tutto Theatre Company at the Long Center for the Performing Arts, Aug. 16-25. Sit at Douglass's door. His words will open doors in your own hearts.

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