Sharing of Information, Invention of the Internet, Parrots and Tool Rooms

By *Harrison Barnes*

I have been having a recurring thought lately that is indicative of a transformation our world has undergone over the past thirty years or so. As a child growing up I observed that most older men I knew always had "shops" set up in their basements or garages. Whether rich or poor, this was something virtually every man I knew had as part of the home. It was a great source of pride. Inside the shop a man would keep his tools all neatly arranged, along with a work table, which was most often built into the garage, outfitted with a vice clamp and so forth. It was a *man's workshop*--a place where women were not really allowed. Women also respected this unwritten law and would leave their men to work alone in that special designated space.

Virtually every man I knew in Detroit had a work space like this. Our relatives in Ohio all had them. My grandfather who was a newspaper reporter had one. During summer barbecues and other gatherings men would invite other men into their workshops and over beers, they would admire each other's tools. Chances are if you go into the house of any *manly man* over 50 virtually anywhere in the United States you will still find one of these work rooms. It does not matter if he is an attorney, an accountant, or a factory worker; all men have these work benches and work rooms. And men often judge each other by the quality of their work rooms.

Most men who had these workshop areas in the home then probably also had fathers who themselves had work rooms. Men would teach their sons about how to use various tools, and would eventually hand down their tools to their kin. It still goes on to some extent, of course, but more on this later....

One of the first introductions that young men typically got to their father's tool room was during the Cub Scout's annual Pinewood Derby. Here, each cub scout was given a small piece of pinewood and four nails, along with some wheels, and with his father the scout was given the task of carving the block of wood into a car, which he would ultimately place on a wooden incline to race down. My father was never into these sorts of activities. My step father was; however, he was dying of cancer when we did this for the first time. I actually ended up doing very well in the Pinewood Derbies growing up. I would just put the wheels on the wood, some weights on the bottom, and some graphite on the nails to help the wheels spin. I remember one year I placed second in the competition. All the other kids had incredibly elaborate cars designed with spoilers, numbers on the side, etc., and they looked great. My cars always sucked and I usually made them just a few hours before the race, but somehow they always did well.

It used to be that a man who had great skills with tools could do so many different things, he was almost guaranteed to make a good living. In those times, there was an abundance of jobs for people who knew how to use tools because a good portion of the economy ran based on that kind of craftsmanship. But to my mind there was more to it than this: the tools represented something about progress, and forged a bond between men and their sons. In modern times, however, something seems to have happened to displace this.

It all started about 10-15 years ago. Today, when you go into homes, what you see are mostly computers. They may be in a corner of the basement, they may be in the kitchen and in all sorts of locations around the house but they are always there. Men now are more apt to show other men their computers and computer work area than their tools. Women also use the computer. It is as if the world has become more democratic and there are fewer secrets. Unlike the old tool workshop, the computer is now out in the open. Unlike the classic division of the sexes, which characterized the old tool work room, the computer workstation of present day is used by both genders--*constantly*.

Today, men do not teach their kids how to use the computer--the kids learn it mostly from other kids. There is an economic component to all of this as well: When children become adults they are much more likely to make money sitting in front of a computer than they are using tools. It is due to this tremendous transformation in the economy that the computer has taken on such importance. People now walk around with computers and laptops, even sit in front of the television while jumping online to check email. The computer has taken on far more importance than the tools of yore.

Our economy and society have also undergone a massive shift from being fundamentally manufacture-based to being fundamentally information-based. It has been an incredible transformation. And this brings me to my parrot, Penny:

Last Halloween I was in a pet store and I saw Penny the Parrot sitting in a cage outside of the pet store. She was situated on a sidewalk overlooking a busy road. When I first walked up to the bird I literally almost ducked for cover because she made the sound of a car screeching. It scared the hell out of me but I thought it was interesting. African Grey Parrots like Penny are really smart, and Penny undoubtedly had learned this sound by watching the cars day after day. And I would wager that she probably found amusement in the reaction that hearing this sound got from people.

I'd passed up the chance to own an African Grey Parrot years ago and had resented it ever since, reasoning that the animals can cost a lot of money and that they live a long time (longer than humans). So they are a lot of responsibility. Moreover, they can be taught to talk, which is entertaining to be sure-but I also figured the "beak service" may not always be expected or appropriate.

My ex-wife used to work for David Geffen, well known record producer, and a lot of her work took place on his Beverly Hills Estate. Geffen had an African Grey Parrot that he kept in the kitchen; however, he apparently rarely went into the kitchen. One day Geffen went into his kitchen for this or that and the parrot looked at Geffen and said to him in the same accent as Geffen's butler:

"I'll get you a glass of water you little shit!"

After this incident Geffen declared he no longer wanted the parrot, and he offered it to my wife and me. At the time we were living in a 400 square foot house in the Hollywood Hills, which also doubled as my wife's office. The house was so small that

we had no room for anything, and the thought of a parrot saying things like "Little prick wants a glass of tea!" all day was just too much for us at the time.

So now, in front of me was this beautiful parrot. The owner of the pet store took her out of the cage and Penny immediately hit it off. I decided right then and there that I was going to add her to my animal collection which includes:

- four ducks,
- three goats,
- four sheep,
- four chickens (2 of them roosters),
- two baby giant Russian tortoises who will grow to over 400 pounds,
- two salt water fish aquariums,
- and a dog.

I brought Penny home with me and announced that she was a present for my daughter for Halloween. I have never heard of a Halloween parrot; however, it seemed like something that would lessen my wife's anger towards this newly imposed addition to our family. I set Penny up near a window in the kitchen so she could enjoy the view and watch people coming and going. Parrots apparently like a lot of activity.

"She loves to make the sound of cars backing up!" the man who sold me Penny told me. It was true. All day long we now hear the sounds of semi trucks backing up right in our kitchen, "beep-beep-beep!"

Penny had been brought to the pet store by the wife of a man who no longer wanted her in the house. She apparently used to sit next to the man's bed all day long, and eventually he could not take care of her. I deduced a couple of weeks into my time with Penny that the previous owner must have actually been quite old and not in the best of health.

I was sitting having a very serious conversation with the husband of one of my wife's friends. This particular individual is extremely intellectual, and he was sitting there dressed in all black talking about existentialism and how there is no point in life. It was mildly depressing just listening to him talk, and at times I found myself starting to drift off into space. Then I heard something really unusual:

"Oh my hemorrhoids!"

At first I was not sure what I was hearing but then I realized it was Penny. The guy was so engrossed in what he had just witnessed, that he completely lost his train of thought. Then a few minutes later it was something else:

"I wish the bitch would leave me alone ...."

And so it goes. During the day she makes sounds like cars screeching out and backing up. Then, each evening around 9:00 pm or so Penny starts making observations of a bedridden older man.

I have got a serious problem, though. Penny refuses to shut up. All day long she whistles about this or that and her random singing, accident sounds and trucks backing up have become way too annoying. My wife is starting to talk about keeping Penny in another part of the house. Like the closet. Okay, not really, but my wife definitely has a point. Something does need to be done about Penny--*but what?* I like to take naps during the day on Saturdays, which has now become a near impossibility. Penny is far too loud and obnoxious.

So yesterday afternoon I got on the Internet and started looking for information on how to stop parrots from screaming and making constant commotion. This seemed like the thing to do because Penny's racket was just getting to be too much. After I spent about 30 minutes looking for helpful information, I gave up., because every single page I found on the Internet offered a cure--which would only be disclosed to me if I were to purchase an e-book, video course, or something along those lines. There were YouTube videos in the search results, and the same thing was occurring with the YouTube videos. Some guy would get up and start talking about how horrible it is listening to parrots scream all day, and then he would claim that I would need to sign up for his course if I wanted to solve the problem.

How could it be that no one out there was willing to help me solve this dilemma without promise of personal gain? All it required was a little basic knowledge, which I expected to find readily available online. Yet, after over a half hour of searching, it seemed that everyone was *hiding the ball*, that is unless I would commit to some stupid e-book or online course.

I am sure if I had searched more extensively for this information I could have found it without having to pay money; however, the experience of looking for a simple bit of information and finding nothing sent me a real strong message: Most people out there are hiding the ball.

In February of this year at the TED Conference I watched Tim Berners-Lee speak. He is credited as the inventor of the World Wide Web, and at the conference he spoke about "linked data" and the importance of sharing information. Most businesses and people try to limit the dissemination of their data and certain information, whether out of selfishness or out of a motivation to maintain a competitive advantage. However, Berners-Lee believes that linking and sharing data is something that ultimately helps everyone. Here is part of his remarkable speech, in which he discusses how the web was founded:

So, going back to 1989, I wrote a memo suggesting the global hypertext system. Nobody really did anything with it, pretty much. But, 18 months later -- this is how innovation happens -- 18 months later, my boss said I could do it on the side, as a sort of a play project, kick the tires of a new computer we'd got. And so he gave me the time to code it up. So I basically roughed out what HTML should look like, hypertext protocol -- HTTP -- the idea of URLs -- these names for things which started with HTTP. I wrote the code and put it out there.

Why did I do it?Well, it was basically frustration. I was frustrated -- I was working as a software engineerin this huge, very exciting lab, lots of people coming from all over the world.They brought all sorts of different computers with them.They had all sorts of different data formats. All sorts, all kinds of documentation systems, so that, in all that diversity, if I wanted to figure out how to build something out of a bit of this and a bit of this,everything I looked into, I had to connect to some new machine,I had to learn to run some new program,I would find the information I wanted in some new data format. And these were all incompatible. It was just very frustrating. The frustration was all this unlocked potential.

In fact, on all these discs there were documents.So if you just imagined them allbeing part of some big, virtual documentation system in the sky,say on the Internet, then life would be so much easier. Well, once you've had an idea like that it kind of gets under your skinand even if people don't read your memo --actually he did, it was found after he died, his copy.He had written, "Vague, but exciting," in pencil, in the corner.

But in general it was difficult -- it was really difficult to explainwhat the web was like. It's difficult to explain to people now that it was difficult then. But then -- OK, when TED started, there was no webso things like "click" didn't have the same meaning. I can show somebody a piece of hypertext,a page which has got links, and we click on the link and bing -- there'll be another hypertext page.Not impressive. You know, we've seen that -- we've got things on hypertext on CD-ROMs.What was difficult was to get them to imagine.So, imagine that that link could have gone to virtually any document you could imagine.Alright, that is the leap that was very difficult for people to make.Well, some people did. Though yeah, it was difficult to explain, but there was a grassroots movement.And that is what has made it most fun. That has been the most exciting thing, not the technology, not the things people have done with it, but actually the community, the spirit of all these people getting together, sending emails. That's what it was like then.

Do you know what? It's funny, but right now it's kind of like that again.I asked everybody, more or less, to put their documents --I said, "Could you put your documents on this web thing?"And, you did. Thanks. It's been a blast, hasn't it?I mean, it has been quite interestingbecause we've found out that the things that happen with the webreally sort of blow us away. They're much more than we'd originally imaginedwhen we put together the initial websitethat we started off with. Now, I want you to put your data on the web. Turns out that there is still huge unlocked potential.There is still a huge frustrationthat people have because we haven't got data on the web as data.

What do you mean data? What's the difference -- documents, data?Documents you read, OK?More or less, you read them, you can follow links from them, and that's it. Data -- you can do all kinds of stuff with a computer. Who was here or has otherwise seen Hans Rosling's talk?One of the great -- yes a lot of people have seen it --one of the great TED talks. Hans put up this presentationin which he showed, for various different countries, in various different colors --he showed income levels on one axisand he showed infant mortality, and he shot this thing animated through time.So, he'd taken this data and made a presentationwhich just shattered a lot of myths that people had about the economics in the developing world.

He put up a slide a little bit like this. It had underground all the dataOK, data is brown and boxy and boring, and that's how we think of it, isn't it?Because data you can't naturally use by itself. But in fact, data drives a huge amount of what happens in our livesand it happens because somebody takes that data and does something with it. In this case Hans had put the data together;he had found it from all kinds of United Nations websites and things. He had put it together,combined it into something more interesting than the original piecesand then he'd put it into this software,which I think his son developed, originally, and produce this wonderful presentation. And Hans made a pointof saying, "Look, it's really important to have a lot of data."And I was happy to see that at the party last nightthat he was still saying, very forcibly, "It's really important to have a lot of data."

So I want us now to think aboutnot just two pieces of data being connected, or six like he did,but I want to think about a world where everybody has put data on the web and so virtually everything you can imagine is on the web. and then calling that linked data. The technology is linked data, and it's extremely simple. If you want to put something on the web for three-year-old first thing is that those HTTP names --those things that start with http: --we're using them not just for documents now, we're using them for things that the documents are about.We're using them for people, we're using them for places, we're using them for your products, we're using them for events.All kinds of conceptual things, they have names now that start with HTTP.

This talk was very inspiring for me because what Tim Berners-Lee is describing essentially is that the entire Internet was started and based around the idea of sharing information. Without the ability and interest to share information, the Internet as we know it never would have come into existence. This is an extremely powerful observation and something that has changed the way things are done. All of the incredible progress we have made in the United States with the Internet has been based on the importance of the sharing of information. Our entire careers, families and everything else have been changed by this sharing of information. We have computers in our homes. The tool work room is disappearing. Social networks have become incredibly popular and powerful, and these are all based on the idea of sharing of information. Our run away businesses, the ones that have become cultural icons: Google, EBay, Amazon, ITunes, Facebook, MySpace, Twitter and so forth are all based on the sharing of information, and the human desire to obtain it.

Sharing of information is what is winning in the world and it is where things are headed. This is why I was so pissed off that I could not find any information about how to stop my parrot from screaming yesterday. I found more people hiding information than sharing it and this disturbed me.

And this brings me to you and your career. The world values the sharing of information. Do not play games and waste your energy hiding information from others. In reality, the more you share, the more will come back to you. When you share information at work with your coworkers you will be respected. When you share information about yourself with your friends and others they will like you better. What wins in the world and what will win for you is the sharing of information.

THE LESSON

Information sharing, as exemplified by the internet, is changing the world for the better and is the way of the future. You must also become a force for sharing information in order to experience progress and achieve your goals.