

THE VOICE

MAGAZINE

Vol 21 Iss 01 2013-01-04

Minimal

Empty is the new full

Sisters Speak

Where is modern woman?

Tech Toy Addict

My smart phone made me do it

Click to discover more of

2012'S Top Picks!



CONTENTS

The Voice's interactive Table of Contents allows you to click a story title to jump to an article. Clicking the bottom right corner of any page returns you here. Some ads and graphics are also links.

Features

Best of <i>The Voice</i> 2012.....	3
Editorial: Addicted and I Just Can't Get Enough	4
Still Sober: Painting Something Beautiful	6
Canadian Voter, American Election	7
Broad Minds Think Small.....	9
Study Space: Slow and Steady.....	11

Columns

Health Matters: Naturally Qualified	12
Write Stuff: The Element of Surprise.....	14
From Where I Sit: That's What I See.....	16
The Mindful Bard: <i>Miss Representation</i>	17

News and Events

Write for Us!	7
Did You Know?.....	15
AUSU Update	20

From Our Readers

Letters to the Editor	2
-----------------------------	---

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

We love to hear from you! Send your questions and comments to voice@voicemagazine.org, and please indicate if we may publish your letter.



The Voice Magazine

www.voicemagazine.org

1213, 10011 109th St. NW
Edmonton AB
T5J 3S8

800.788.9041 ext. 2905

Email

voice@voicemagazine.org

Publisher

AU Students' Union

Editor-In-Chief

Tamra Ross

Managing Editor

Christina M. Frey

Regular Contributors

Hazel Anaka
Katie D'Souza
S.D. Livingston
Wanda Waterman

The Voice is published every Friday in HTML and PDF format.

For weekly email reminders as each issue is posted, fill out the subscription form [here](#).

The Voice does not share its subscriber list with anyone.

© 2013 by *The Voice*

BEST OF THE VOICE 2012

Christina M. Frey



Well, we survived the holiday season—not to mention the end of the world! But even though we’ve already put away the decorations and made (and broken!) New Year’s resolutions, the celebration isn’t over quite yet: It’s time for the Best of *The Voice* issue, our annual showcase of some of our best writing from the preceding year.

This year’s Best of *The Voice* is bursting with reviews, articles, reflections, and more—a perfect sampling of the diverse tones and styles you’ll find in any given issue of *The Voice Magazine*.

Each week you’ll see a wide spectrum of features, ranging from personal experiences and musings on life to current events and hot topics, interviews, travelogues, course reviews, humour, and more.

In our longest-running column, “From Where I Sit,” Hazel Anaka talks about the ups and downs of life in small town Alberta—and by extension, life in general. In addition to periodic features on quality of life, spirituality, and the like, we have a focus on health: Naturopathic doctor Katie D’Souza’s “Health Matters” column covers trends in natural healing.

If you write essays or novels or just love reading, you’ll want to check out S.D. Livingston’s “Write Stuff,” a column that looks at trending topics in the world of literature, self-publishing, and more.

Want to get more specific recommendations? In her “Mindful Bard” and “Gregor’s Bed” columns, reviewer Wanda Waterman discusses books, music and film that are aesthetically pleasing and socially relevant, or that stand out as uniquely and authentically avant-garde.

For students, columnist Maxie van Roye covers ideas, tips and trends for improving study habits or figuring out the best path to take on your own educational journey. We also offer the latest news from AUSU and include a regular mini-feature that highlights websites and services of special interest to students—whether AU-based or available elsewhere online.

Finally, each week you’ll find news bites, trivia, and any number of features to inform, inspire, and intrigue you. There’s something for everyone in *The Voice Magazine*.

So pull out the silly hats, the whistles, and maybe even a cracker and a glass of champagne. Come celebrate with us in 2013!

EDITORIAL

Christina M. Frey

**Addicted and I Just Can't Get Enough***This editorial originally appeared February 17, 2012, in issue 2007.*

Are you “addicted” to technology?

According to a new study, you may be—and it may not be your fault. After all, the study found, social media like Twitter is “as addictive as cigarettes.” How can we fight that kind of power?

We’re glued to our “CrackBerrys.” Married to our iPhones. Obsessed with Angry Birds, Twitter, RSS feeds, blogging, 24-7 information. We joke about it, but at the same time we’re serious. We know we have a problem.

But what exactly is it?

“Addiction” is a pretty strong word. There’s often an element of chemical dependency involved in something like drug or cigarette addictions, and it seems rather far-fetched to claim definitively that social networking itself chemically alters our brains. And though the compulsive use of Facebook could suggest emotional dependence—in the sense that we’re driven to it, unhappy without it—it doesn’t follow that the media itself is to blame for the “addictive” behaviour.

And yet there’s something there that just can’t be dismissed. We impulsively check and re-check. Are we addicted to *technology*? Or is it a stand-in for something else?

Recently I came to a realization. I was stuck in a long line at the mall. My phone battery had died. As I stood waiting, waiting, waiting, I realized something alarming: I don’t know how to just do one thing anymore. Technology makes frenzied multi-multi-tasking more *possible*, but it’s not responsible for it.

I’m addicted to multi-tasking.

It’s time to stop blaming our devices. In fact, a fascinating article in *The Atlantic* argues that blaming electronics for our frenzied pace and our inability to connect with each other and the world around us actually makes things worse.

Lately, the author points out, there’s been a trend toward a “digital Sabbath,” a regular time when we unplug ourselves. It’s supposed to be freeing, a break from the constant connectedness of our daily lives. A backlash against some of our culture’s social problems. Such a time of restoration sounds ideal. How can it be damaging?

Because it creates a fake solution, the author argues—a band-aid on the problem—instead of addressing real issues. By making technology the scapegoat for our inattentiveness, she says, “[we] absolve ourselves of the need to create social, political, and, sure, technological structures that allow us to have the kinds of relationships we want with the people around us.” What we need, she continues, is to evaluate our obligations, relationships, and priorities—and go on from there.

Multi-tasking is good, to a point. The line is crossed when we can't focus on just one priority, even if it's a crucial, human thing like family relationships. Our smart phones make multi-tasking easy, but we can text *or* talk *or* chat *or* read our Twitter feed. Or have a real-life conversation. We don't need to do it all at once. We can choose to carve out exclusive time for the highest priorities in our lives, whether we're pursuing them face to face or online.

Technology is a great tool for interpersonal communication; it is a means of connecting like never before. We don't necessarily need *less* technology. We just need to learn to manage it better.

STILL SOBER: PAINTING SOMETHING BEAUTIFUL

E.L. Farris



This feature originally appeared October 5, 2012, in issue 2038.

The condensation glistens on the pint-sized glass of mahogany beer. A caption on the picture lists the type of beer, and above it, announces the day: National Beer Appreciation Day. It looks like one of those perfect autumn brews.

I wish I was at that bar, with that beer in front of me, and the cold liquid in my mouth, crisp, a tad bitter, a touch sweet; and then it's flowing down my throat and I'm feeling it in my head, this numbing, buzzing, floating feeling. It will take me up and away from the chair my back presses against; it will send me into a new and better stratosphere. A new world. A better one.

It always has had this effect on me. Wherever I was, however I was, it promised to take me away from it. It took me away from the pain and sadness of it all, or it sent me flying into a deeper sadness. You see, I knew it didn't make me feel better. I knew damned well it made me feel worse. And that was what I was bent on doing. Destroying it all, including the good, until I didn't have to see or feel any of it.

Sometimes I admitted it. Usually I lied. I lied to myself. After all, I was just like all the other Americans who drink beer and watch football, and if they were okay, so was I.

I sit there staring at the picture one of my friends has posted—the glistening pint glass full of beautiful brown beer—and I'm flooded by anger. It feels heavy inside me, just like how I feel after eating too much pasta. I'm angry. I'm really, really angry. Take something and throw it through a window angry . . . scream and yell and flail around on the floor angry.

Why can't I? Why must today and tomorrow stretch into endless eternity . . . why, damn it, why can't I hold a pint in my hand and tip it back and feel the cold liquid turn me warm inside? Why, damn it, why can't I?

A day later, I'm driving westward for my husband's work picnic. I knead the leather steering wheel with the tips of my fingers. I can feel every thread, and I like to rub my fingers across the stitches again and again as the road folds and rises and falls ahead of me. In a little while, I'll be greeting people I barely know, and I'll be fidgeting and worrying and everyone else will be drinking a cold, ice-brewed something or other.

I'll be holding a diet soda, and I'll rub my hand over the aluminum and try to hold on and take it all in without being afraid. And then . . . then the sadness will slam into the deepest pit of me. You know the place I'm talking about? The place where you want to mourn for something you thought you had but never really could have, should have owned? A closed-off part of you, an elusive, elemental aloneness that no bottle, no glistening pint of slightly bitter liquid could fill? It's where some of us go to hide, pretending that with the door shut tight, we'll find peace and love and comfort, but we know that when we open our eyes, all we'll have is the shreds of something real, something good . . . dying slowly inside.

That's the colour of what I'm facing. It's all the colours from a box of children's paints mixed in together, and when the child is done playing, there is no hue really, no beauty left, just another shade of putrid greenish-gray. And that, that my friends, is why I don't pick up the glass and pour the liquid down my throat and wait, wait for the colours to fade.

Instead, I hold a paintbrush. I dip it into my favourite colour, which is blue, and I draw my own picture. The pain is still there, but in my mind, I envision something different . . . something better. I pick up the brush. Maybe, just maybe, I'll paint something beautiful.

Writer E.L. Farris blogs at [Running from Hell with El](#).

WRITE FOR US!

What topics and issues do you want to see covered in *The Voice*? What type of features do you like best? *The Voice* wants to hear from you! Email us at voice@voicemagazine.org with your ideas, letters, and suggestions.

And if you've got something to say about university life, or life in general, consider writing for *The Voice Magazine*. We're always seeking new voices and fresh perspectives—and submissions from our readers are welcome! To find out more about becoming a *Voice* writer, email the editors at voice@voicemagazine.org.

All accepted submissions are purchased as freelance pieces and cannot have been published elsewhere (including online in any way) or written as academic papers.

CANADIAN VOTER, AMERICAN ELECTION

Wanda Waterman



This feature originally appeared November 16, 2012, in issue 2044.

My family's been skipping back and forth across the Canadian-American border for generations, and many of us, including yours truly, hold dual citizenship. The events of September 11 persuaded the government to demand for the first time that we get passports to move between our two native lands, for which inconvenience we felt mildly insulted.

Though I was born in the US, my family came to Canada when I was three. I was raised, educated, and indoctrinated in the ignorance, apathy, and commitment to tolerance and moderation that makes us proud to be Canucks.

For the last year I've been staying in the North Country (everything above Crawford's Notch) of New Hampshire. It's in the mountains, winters are cold, and the natural splendour makes your jaw drop. Just like home. You'd think.

My dad's a born and bred New Englander, and I'm now residing in the town where he grew up. I share a lot of the values of the people here: the stoicism, the commitment to hard work, and the sense of honour.

A sense of connection between Canada and New England goes way back. In 1812, a proposed invasion of Canada (then still a small British colony) by a group of overzealous Americans, still a bit heady from the success of the Revolution, was met with a stubborn recalcitrance from New Englanders. Despite a zealous marketing campaign, every last one of the Northeasterners was against the invasion, maybe because, like our family, everyone had relatives in Canada. There really was no good reason to go to war against Cousin Resolved across the border in Danville.

In spite of the historical and familial ties, however, the thinking remains different between the two nationalities. When I came here I was already well aware that differing histories and propagandas had rendered certain topics of discussion untouchable. I told myself that I wouldn't get into political discussions, and in over a year I've only slipped up twice: once by pointing out that maybe the antipathy to socialized medicine was a symptom of a lingering fear of communism, and a second time by admitting that I could not take sides on the abortion issue.

Emotions are heavily invested in certain issues, and it's easy to offend. Americans tend to define themselves more by their belief systems. They're also a little more drawn to confrontation; they don't mind hurting feelings and calling each other idiots, but for Canadians that just doesn't seem right.

So it was with slight trepidation that I decide to vote in the 2012 presidential election.

The polls are located in a large brick community building. Outside, an assortment of ancient men in plaid flannel jackets and hardware store hats are standing around or leaning on a fence, holding Mitt Romney signs. I ask them if it's a good day to vote.

"Aaaany day's a good day to vooote," one answers, with dollops of New England inflection. "But it's an aaaaawful cold one!"

I think to myself: *They can probably tell just by looking at you that you believe in social anarchy, natural food, and putting all of Wall Street in jail. Shut your mouth and keep walking.*

I enter a huge community hall with a few tables, about a dozen officials, and a row of voting booths. Young people in camouflage fatigues are walking around in pairs, looking authoritative. I don't know why they're there, and neither, it seems, does anyone else.

Back home in Bear River, Nova Scotia, we vote on the first floor of the fire department, moving through a hallway and two crammed rooms before reaching the booths. Nobody ever pickets outside. The voter is greeted with smiles of approval. *We're glad you came*, they seem to say. Those who know you chat you up and ask about your folks.

There's some of that here in small-town New Hampshire, too, but with that coating of frost we've come to expect of New Englanders. In both places there's a super-friendly, perky person making everyone feel at home, as well as a curmudgeon who openly disdains the way things are done now.

I show my passport and birth certificate at the table in the entrance. They have to call the capital in my case, because I have neither a New Hampshire driver's license nor a social security number. But they're happy to do it and even seem a bit pleased—this is a first for them, and they mention it several times. Some of the older people remember my dad, uncle, and aunts; this makes it seem just like home.

After I leave I recall my father telling me how my grandparents used to drive to the polls here. My Vermont grandmother always voted Democrat and my New Hampshire grandfather always voted Republican. He would kvetch at her all the way to the polls: "Why are we even bothering to go? We'll just cancel each out!"

My grandmother would sit there in stony Yankee silence and then vote her way.

That's the spirit, Gram.



Wanda also penned the poems for the artist book They Tell My Tale to Children Now to Help Them to be Good, a collection of meditations on fairy tales, illustrated by artist Susan Malmstrom.

BROAD MINDS THINK SMALL

Max Birkner



Cluttered to the Bone

This feature originally appeared April 13, 2012, in issue 2014.

The Jeep had been stolen, Reno finally admitted. Natalie and I were halfway across America by that point. We had been thumbing our way across the continent, our last hurrah as reckless teenagers. Reno and Penny had picked us up in Fox Creek, Arizona—a modern-day Bonnie and Clyde, but with less sex appeal.

On day four with our new desperado friends, we drove into Forrest City, Arkansas. Natalie and I left our duffle bag in the car to go into a Wal-Mart to use the washroom. Reno and Penny were going to a gas station to ask directions. When we came out, the car was gone.

It was a chilly December night. The snow had begun to fall. We stood on the concrete, Natalie and I, the flakes coming down around us, the empty white lines of the parking lot stretching out like a field. We were 3,500 kilometres from home. In our pockets we had our wallets with ID, but no money. We had one cotton sweater between us.

It was one of the greatest moments of my life.

Have you ever lost everything you thought you needed? Have you ever cleaned up your desk and found it easier to think? Have you ever gone on vacation and only used three out of the ten t-shirts you packed? When I was little, I used to wonder about the cartoon characters who set off on their adventures with nothing but a bundle tied to a stick. Where was the rest of their stuff?

Hello. My name is Max. I'm a 24-year-old student. My favourite color is green. And I am a minimalist.

A minimalist is someone who wants as few objects as possible. If this is you, you are the opposite of a hoarder. You will never be one of those TV types who lives alone with 27 felines in a massive house full of furniture left behind by three dead spouses. As I write this, I sit in the bedroom of my tiny basement suite. In the room there is a desk and a mattress. On the desk sits my laptop. There are two duffle bags full of clothing and essentials, like my passport. There is a closet that holds a few shoes and my tent. In a corner there is a pile of beat-up wooden furniture that is about to make its way to the alley. It took me an hour to move into this place (it was furnished). The move was completed when my girlfriend brought over a knife and fork from her place. She insisted, although I do fairly well with a metal camping spoon and my Leatherman pocketknife. Every day I commute on the Canada Line, the same line that goes past my regular stop and on to Vancouver International. In an instant I could be gone. In an hour, I could be on a flight to anywhere.

How do you become a minimalist? Like everything worthwhile, it takes time (except in those instances when you're suddenly stranded in Arkansas without a toothbrush). You don't have to throw a Molotov cocktail into your house and call it a day. Minimizing, keeping output high and intake low, is a lifestyle—something you do every day. And it's very rewarding.

As a student, especially at a place like AU, where the nature of the institution attracts flexible, DIY types, minimizing is a ticket to good grades. Less clutter is guaranteed to boost your concentration. It's also a money saver: Fewer payments on fewer big toys means more liquid assets, which means tons of flexibility. Honduras on a whim, here you go.

For a starter guide to minimizing, look below. It's not an extensive list (that wouldn't be very minimalistic of me). But it's a sampling, and downsizing is easy and fun to figure out once you get started.

“Every time we sit down in front of the boob tube, we're inadvertently watching other people have adventurous, enriching, glamorous lives, while cheating ourselves out of the same experience.”

1. Get rid of something every day. This does not have to be wasteful. Give things to charity or thrift stores, or sell them at consignment shops and in classified advertisements. Kijiji will be your friend.
2. Digitalize your life. Banking and bill paying can all be done online. School notes, homework, and music can all be kept exclusively on a laptop. Only print out the essentials.
3. Spend money on experiences. Go bungee jumping instead of shopping. Attend an event or get involved with a community group. It doesn't have to be a book club: Join a rock-climbing gym or take a carpentry class. You might even learn something—a rich alternative to owning another pair of blue suede shoes.
4. Move to a new place. This is a good way to start out fresh. Look for a furnished apartment so you don't have to go through borrowing a friend's truck every time you move.
5. Ditch the TV. This could go in with Step 1, but it's such a big item that it deserves its own number. All our clocks are ticking. Every time we sit down in front of the boob tube, we're inadvertently watching other people have adventurous, enriching, glamorous lives, while cheating ourselves out of the same experience. If you knew ahead of time that tomorrow afternoon a shoddy plywood construction tunnel would leave you crushed under a fallen pile of bricks, would you really be thinking about another *House* rerun or would you be doing things that mattered? Spend your time—and your money—on your dreams.

Standing in the parking lot with Natalie, I felt something lift from my shoulders. It was a mystifying sensation: a revelation. We had nothing. But we were still okay. I stood there frozen in my spot, not from the wind but from the freedom. Natalie was swearing a blue streak. Late-night shoppers looked at us. I swore and said something to make her feel better, pretending to be upset. But I was trying to stop myself from smiling. What we would do now, where we would go, I had no idea. But there was nothing tying me down, either. By the wrenching away of everything I had, my life had suddenly started.

(Read the continuation [here](#).)

STUDY SPACE

Maxie van Roye

**Slow and Steady**

This feature originally appeared September 7, 2012, in issue 2034.

You've got your books. You've got your supplies. You've carved out time and finances and a space to work, and now you're ready to begin the school year.

Except that you're not, really.

You sit at your desk and stare at the schedule—and stare and stare. You have a headache. You're terrified. You want to be excited, you need to get a good start, and yet you're just not feeling it. What you *are* feeling is a little over your head.

We hear a lot about scheduling, and for good reason. Figuring out your study plan is crucial; and whether you use a daily schedule or set weekly goals, having some kind of plan is key to your educational success.

But sometimes, marrying yourself to your schedule—especially early in the semester—can hurt more than it helps.

Have you ever started out with plans to do a distance run, but got sidelined early in the race thanks to cramps or exhaustion? Maybe you didn't warm up enough. Maybe you started out too fast, with too great an intensity. Or maybe you threw yourself into it with no idea of the physical and emotional costs.

An educational journey is the same way. As soon as we get our course materials, we figure out goals, set up schedules, and commit ourselves to a rigorous plan of study and focus. We fear that if we fall behind at the beginning, we'll never catch up, so we push ourselves hard in the first few weeks.

But amidst all our good intentions, we're forgetting something vitally important: the semester isn't a sprint, it's a cross-country run. And overdoing it at the outset can often mean we get burned out more quickly later on, when it matters even more.

Some long-distance runners prefer to go at a moderate pace early in the run, and then amp it up midway through once they're warmed up and comfortable. Similarly, easing yourself into your new course load may give you the chance to prepare yourself emotionally, mentally, and, yes, physically, for the academic marathon you're about to take on.

If you've got a block, you're extremely stressed, or you think you've taken on more than you can handle, then start out at a gentler pace. You've made a schedule, but you don't have to stick to it the first week or two. Giving yourself time to get accustomed to your courses—or, if you're a new student, to university-level academics in general—may put you behind a few days, but you'll easily catch those up once you find yourself getting into the flow of the semester.

Starting out strong may sound good in theory, but in the end it's a steady pace and a strong, determined finish that will make or break your academic career. Slow but steady truly does win the race.

HEALTH MATTERS

Katie D'Souza

Naturally Qualified*This article originally appeared April 27, 2012, in issue 2016.*

As interest in alternative health grows, natural health practitioners seem to be springing up everywhere. But how credible is your natural health provider? Has she attended and passed an accredited course at a reputable school and been licensed for practice by a third-party licensing body (to whom she is still accountable)? Or does he claim to practice safe natural medicine, with only a weekend course behind his name?

In many parts of Canada and the US there is little or no regulation of natural health practitioners. This means that there are no training requirements, so misrepresentation is easy; natural health care practitioners can label themselves as such, despite their inadequate practical training, lack of knowledge, and often dangerous medical practices. Practitioners can easily claim skills they don't possess, advertising themselves using the same descriptive name as qualified practitioners ("massage therapist," for instance).

Before placing yourself under the care of a natural health practitioner, it is imperative to check out his qualifications and education first. Don't be satisfied with a claim ("I'm an acupuncturist"); find out where she received her education (was it the Canadian College of Naturopathic Medicine or a correspondence course?), what initials they have behind their name (and whether these actually exist as part of a body of practitioners), and whether they've passed their licensing exams.

Why Bother?

But why the fuss? Since natural health practitioners practice "natural" medicine, it must be safe, right? Not necessarily.

There are two main reasons for checking your practitioner's qualifications. First is safety; a practitioner who's passed licensing exams has been tested extensively around safety issues. A naturopathic doctor, for instance, has been tested for knowledge of contraindications between botanical supplements and pharmaceutical medications. A properly trained acupuncturist knows what angle to insert acupuncture needles to avoid piercing organs or major blood vessels. Safety is key in medical practice, regardless of whether the treatment is "natural," and improper instruction can be devastating to the patient. I recall the story of a friend who had visited a shiatsu therapist for stress relief; she hadn't checked to ensure his proper training and licensing, and as a result sustained a serious brain stem injury when the practitioner attempted heavy pressure on the back of her neck as part of his therapy.

The second reason to check your practitioner's qualifications is to assess her skills and training. You want the best health care available, so your provider should be able to work with you on all aspects of your care. Better training and experience can lead to better results. You want someone trustworthy and reliable, someone of whom you can ask questions and who will give you knowledgeable answers.

What Do I Look For?

There should be several must-have items on your checklist. First, check the "letters" after the practitioner's name. Is your naturopath a "naturopath" or a "naturopathic doctor"? The letters "N.D" after the name should distinguish the real from the fake. In some provinces of Canada (Ontario, for instance) and much of the US, anyone can call herself a "naturopath" (with no distinction between those who've had a six-month correspondence course with no clinical experience and those who have taken a four-year postgraduate program with 12 months of clinical rotation). Find out what the licensing requirements are in your province or state, and go from there.

Is your massage therapist a Registered Massage Therapist (R.M.T), or does he just call himself a "massage therapist"? The R.M.T. initials mean that the practitioner has not only passed a comprehensive program at a reputable school with clinical experience, but has also passed licensing exams.

What about your acupuncturist? The initials D.Ac. Or L.Ac. after the name indicate an acupuncturist who is licensed to practice in your province or state. You can determine licensing status either through a direct

inquiry or through a visit to the practitioner's office to ensure that the certificate from the licensing body is not only displayed on the wall but also up to date (with registration stickers for the current year, or some other significance indicating current licensure).

Checking qualifications can seem unnecessary, but without consistent regulation of natural health practitioners it's easy for unqualified practitioners to pass themselves off as thoroughly trained. Your health is important enough that it's worth the hassle to ensure the best possible care.

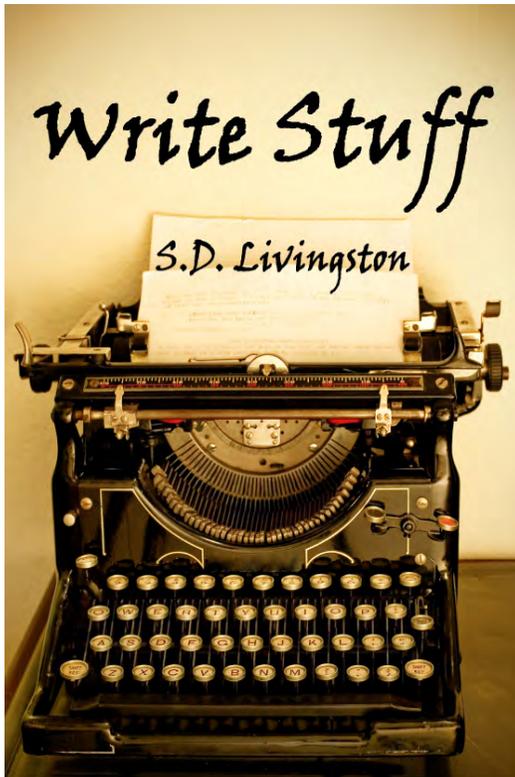
"Safety is key in medical practice, regardless of whether the treatment is 'natural,' and improper instruction can be devastating to the patient."

Do your homework and make sure that your natural health care practitioner is qualified!



Katie D'Souza is an AU graduate and a licensed naturopathic doctor. She currently practices in Ontario.

Disclaimer: The information contained in this article is for personal interest only; it is not intended for diagnosis or treatment of any condition. Readers are always encouraged to seek the professional advice of a licensed physician or qualified health care practitioner for personal health or medical conditions.



The Element of Surprise

This column first appeared January 27, 2012, in issue 2004.

When's the last time a piece of writing surprised you? I mean really opened your eyes to a new idea, or startled you out of complacency, or introduced you to a pastime you never knew existed. If it's been a while, there are easy ways to change that—and it might surprise you to know that they're the same tools we use to limit what we read.

In spite of (or maybe because of) the endless hum of the information highway, we're remarkably good at tuning out things we don't want to hear. Instead of letting the flood of newspapers, magazines, and websites swamp us, we tweak endless options to selectively pull in small streams of info. RSS feeds deliver content from favourite sites, while news aggregators like Yahoo offer customized settings right down to local TV listings.

And now, with e-readers and tablets gathering massive piles of data on our reading habits, it's easier than ever for authors and publishers to update books, customizing them to even more closely match people's preferences. As Nicholas Carr notes in this *Wall Street Journal* [article](#), the ease of updating digital texts “will make it hard to resist tinkering with a book in response to such signals, adding a few choice words here, trimming a chapter there, maybe giving a key character a quick makeover.” If most readers skip the chapters where the hero isn't chasing someone or blowing something up, why not simply get rid of those parts altogether?

But by customizing nearly every type of media we read, we also run the risk of closing our window on the world, of narrowing our interests so much that we narrow our minds. Tweak your settings closely enough and, except for the occasional headline that gets through, it's possible to fill your RSS feeds, home pages, and Twitter stream with nothing but news about fashion or finance.

Even those helpful suggestions on Amazon and other retail sites can perpetuate the cycle. How does it offer me fresh ideas to know that customers who bought the same spy novel as I did also purchased similar books in the same genre?

This behaviour's nothing new. An introductory journalism course I took many years ago devoted particular attention to this bias. Whether it was print newspapers in the 1950s or a website today, people have always tended to seek out media that already agree with their opinions—media that offer an authoritative, reassuring voice that it's the rest of the world that's wrong.

“ . . . by customizing nearly every type of media we read, we also run the risk of closing our window on the world, of narrowing our interests so much that we narrow our minds.”

So how can we turn those filters into tools to selectively expand our world, not limit it? Choose a topic or person you know nothing about and add it to your settings. Subscribe to a blog on lacrosse or bonsai trees or wedding planners, and commit to scanning the titles and reading occasional articles for a month. Bored witless? Unsubscribe and choose another topic.

If you only ever visit the corporate media sites, bookmark [Mother Jones](#) or [The Dominion](#). Subscribe to the lifestyle feed of a foreign newspaper to get a first-hand take on the small, daily interests of people who might seem to have nothing in common with you (most of the major dailies offer versions in several languages). The Arts & Letters Daily [site](#) offers dozens of links to newspapers, magazines, columnists, and blogs of all stripes.

With all the choices available, it's easy to understand why we filter so many voices out. But those same filters can also be remarkably useful in letting a few new voices in—voices that speak of unknown possibilities. Try it. You just might be surprised.

S.D. Livingston is the author of several books, including the new suspense novel Kings of Providence. Visit her [website](#) for information on her writing (and for more musings on the literary world!).

DID YOU KNOW?

DegreeWorks



It takes a lot of planning to map out an academic career. But when you're working with information in several different media, the process can be time-consuming and frustrating. However, the future is promising: AU has launched DegreeWorks, "a comprehensive academic advising and degree audit solution" that communicates directly with AU's internal student information system and streamlines program planning.

DegreeWorks helps students plan their educational futures by "automatically [retrieving] a student's academic record . . . and [organizing] it into an educational plan on the web, identifying program requirements, courses completed and courses still needed to complete a degree."

Students are also able to "explore 'What if' scenarios to measure the effects of changing programs or adding majors or minors" and check GPAs based on projected future course grades.

It is user friendly, and AU has advisors available for students who need help navigating the system.

For more information on DegreeWorks, visit the [information site](#).



That's What I See

This column originally appeared February 17, 2012, in issue 2007.

Have you ever wished you had the house all to yourself? That those people making demands on your time, energy, and patience would take a long walk on a short dock?

Those people might be kids, teenagers, spouses, or parents. All the annoying stuff they do is one huge pain in the butt. The toilet seat left up, the battle for the remote, the mess in the kitchen, the book bags littering the entrance, and the second-hand newspaper all irk.

You wish for silence, because you don't really appreciate their choice in music or the yelling some families do. With little kids, you wish for some uninterrupted time to eat, sleep, bathe, or just pee.

You hate yourself for wanting to smother your snoring husband, but sleep deprivation brings murderous thoughts. And does he think you're a short order cook? A laundress? A concierge?

I'm here to tell you that if you've had any of those thoughts (or worse), you're normal. As someone living in silence right now, let me also tell you: watch what you pray for.

Roy is away trucking about an hour and half from home. Closer than the years he went to Houston, but too far to be home every night. With him gone I'm responsible for everything. Now I have to feed the five farm cats and keep the three bird feeders topped up. I have to remember to fuel the car and plug it in during the -30 degree cold snap.

It's up to me to pick up the mail and pay the bills. I had to meet with the crop insurance adjuster who came to check the granaries to see if we have a claim for a poor canola crop.

I can handle all that and more. What's most difficult is the toll taken on one's psychological well-being. I try not to dwell on the spooky noises or the strange vehicles driving down our country road. I keep the doors locked and have on occasion not answered when I didn't know who was knocking. I think about who I would call if the car wouldn't start or if it slid into the ditch. I am aware of which lights I have on at night and how much of my interior is visible to someone looking in.

I try hard not to think about the 77-year-old retired farmer who was abducted a couple of weeks ago from his farmhouse near Vulcan, Alberta, and later found dismembered. I try hard not to think of myself as a sitting duck.

Anyone who's lost a spouse to death—or even work away from home—would welcome the snoring, the noise, the mess. That's what I see, from where I sit.

Hazel Anaka's first novel is [Lucky Dog](#). Visit her [website](#) for more information or follow her on Twitter @anakawrites.

THE MINDFUL BARD

Wanda Waterman



Books, Music, and Film to Wake Up Your Muse and Help You Change the World

This column originally appeared December 9, 2012, in issue 2047.

Film: *Miss Representation* (2011)

Director: Jennifer Siebel Newsom

Genre: Documentary

Like a Smile from a Big Sister Who Really Believes in You

Several intelligent, sensitive high school girls are talking about what it's like to grow up in a culture that honours male achievers and female bombshells, a culture in which women are expected to conform to an ideal of beauty and domestic *savoir faire* that doesn't exist anywhere in the real world. The girls reflect on how this contributes to low self-esteem, eating disorders, depression, and suicidal thoughts, and ultimately affects their ability to achieve.

But doesn't the West, and America in particular, have the world's most progressive attitudes toward women? We hear about this a lot, especially when we're comparing ourselves to other cultures. Most especially we hear it from men who want us to show more skin and give out more—apparently, this is what makes us “free.”

The myth of American female freedom prevails in spite of the fact that compared with the rest of the world, the US ranks 90th in terms of female representation in legislatures. Additionally, there is an entertainment industry that portrays women as intellectually limited bimbos.

Often the blindest apologists are Western women themselves. When asked why women are freer here, women almost inevitably answer, “We get to wear what we want,” as if that were even true. We scream foul when we see a headscarf, even though women who wear the headscarf often do so expressly to avoid the kind of objectification to which we so often fall prey.

The media has played a major role in bringing about the current degeneration of attitudes toward women. After the huge strides made by feminists in the '60s and '70s, we've hit a slippery slope that's already led to an increase in violence toward women and a limiting of opportunities.

The rise of conservatism in government would have, but for a few indomitable women, edged out women's concerns completely. The plight has been rendered the more dolorous by an increasingly

dumbed-down news media that's garnered enough power to influence mainstream attitudes. The fact that it's mostly men who control the media presents a nightmarish bedtime story.

On television, billboards, the Internet, and the silver screen, we're presented with digitally enhanced standards of beauty that we might be able to approximate given enough money, free time, and the absence of interest in anything else in life. But if we do achieve flawless beauty, what have we gained? We've been told we'll have power over men and even women because of our incredible desirability, but in fact we'll have no power at all. And after the age of 40, we might as well just disappear.

If we reject the pursuit of personal beauty and pursue high levels of achievement and power and try to influence culture and society, we're met with a tremendous amount of opposition and criticism. Witness hecklers yelling, "Iron my shirt!" at Hillary Clinton during one of her speeches.

Objectifying someone is the first step toward justifying violence, hostility, rejection, and blame, and capitalism is a major cog in the objectification machinery. As Marx quoted a ruthless English factory owner: "There is much money to be made here, Mr. Marx." And there is money to be made in degrading and dehumanizing women, in deriding feminists, and in dismissing the concerns of women as trivial.

Those responsible for deregulating the economy and news media were the very "family values" people who for years bleated that feminists were destroying the family. Huge conglomerates sprang up with no accountability except the bottom line, which meant catering to the lowest common denominator.

Yelling gets more ratings, for example, and so do barely-dressed female news anchors talking about trends and fads. Celebrity news and gossip are now breaking news. We've come a long way, baby! In the post-Friedman world, marketing dictates our values while lawmakers are conspicuously absent.

Miss Representation is an extremely thorough documentary, managing to convey the full spectrum of the problem in a simple, engaging way. It's good to see so many great minds weighing in on the issue, and the fact that so many excellent solutions are proposed is also encouraging. Did I mention that the film is incredibly uplifting? After you watch it you'll be convinced that, come hell or high water, you can do it.

Proposed Solutions:

- We should be telling our own stories in media and the arts.
- We must acknowledge that in our culture, men need spiritual healing; we need to teach our sons not to divide their hearts from their heads.
- We should stop competing and scrutinizing each other and support each other more as colleagues and mentors.

"The media has played a major role in bringing about the current degeneration of attitudes toward women . . . we've hit a slippery slope that's already led to an increase in violence toward women and a limiting of opportunities."

- We must not be afraid to pursue our dreams.
- We need to use our consumer voice. Women have 86 per cent of the buying power in the US—we can use it to express our resistance.
- We need to promote female role models who've actually scored something in their lives besides great bodies and rich husbands.
- We can join the movement!

Miss Representation manifests seven of the Mindful Bard's criteria for films well worth seeing: 1) it is authentic, original, and delightful; 2) it poses and admirably responds to questions that have a direct bearing on my view of existence; 3) it stimulates my mind; 4) it harmoniously unites art with social action, saving me from both seclusion in an ivory tower and slavery to someone else's political agenda; 5) it is about attainment of the true self; 6) it displays an engagement with and compassionate response to suffering; 7) it renews my enthusiasm for positive social action.

Wanda also penned the poems for the artist book They Tell My Tale to Children Now to Help Them to be Good, a collection of meditations on fairy tales, illustrated by artist Susan Malmstrom.



“Feminism directly confronts the idea that one person or set of people [has] the right to impose definitions of reality on others.”

Liz Stanley and Sue Wise

AUSU UPDATE**Bethany Tynes****AUSU e-newsletters a success**

AUSU has been piloting the use of e-newsletters to contact our student body over the last year. We began by sending these newsletters to students registered on our website, and after a very positive initial response, we are now sending e-newsletters to all students currently enrolled in any AU undergrad course, as well as all students registered on our site who wish to receive email. We're looking forward to keeping in closer touch with our members, and hope in future to be able to send regular monthly e-newsletters to all members (though we'll also respect your right to unsubscribe). If there's something you'd like to see included in our newsletters, please let us know!

Instructional model survey

Last June, AUSU learned that AU planned to move all undergraduate courses to a call centre model (like the one currently used in AU's Faculty of Business) beginning in September. We felt that this was a very major change, and was surprised that the university had not conducted consultation of AU's students or academics. AUSU drafted a survey and sent it to all our members via e-newsletter. Over 2,500 of you took the time to fill out this survey, giving us a wealth of information about what's important to AU's undergrad students. The AUSU Executive is now working to make sure that these important student perspectives are communicated to the university, and we have presented our survey results report to a number of AU community members and committees, including CUPE 3911 (the AU tutors' union) and the Board of Governors (AU's highest governing body).

DegreeWorks now available

We've been waiting for AU to roll out their new DegreeWorks system—and it's finally available to students! If you started an AU program after September 2010, you can now use DegreeWorks to see how your courses fulfill the requirements of your program. DegreeWorks is available online anytime, and can instantly help you see which courses you still need to complete on the way to your credential. Let us know what you think of DegreeWorks, and we'll make sure we let the university know how they're doing meeting student needs.

Get in touch with us

Have comments or questions about AUSU or anything in this column? Feel free to get in touch with AUSU President Bethany at president@ausu.org. You can also e-mail our office at ausu@ausu.org or call 1-800-788-9041 ext. 3413. We'd love to hear from you!

This column is provided by AUSU to facilitate communication with its members. The Voice does not write or edit this section; all content has been exclusively and directly provided by AUSU, and any questions or comments about the material should be directed to ausu@ausu.org.

CLASSIFIEDS

Classifieds are free for AU students! Contact voice@voicemagazine.org for more information.

THE VOICE

1213, 10011 109th St. NW, Edmonton, AB T5J 3S8 - Ph: 800.788.9041 ext. 2905 - Fax: 780.497.7003 attn: Voice Editor

Publisher Athabasca University Students' Union
Editor-In-Chief Tamra Ross
Managing Editor Christina M. Frey

Regular Columnists Hazel Anaka, Katie D'Souza, S.D. Livingston, Wanda Waterman

www.voicemagazine.org

The Voice is published every Friday in HTML and PDF format.

Contact *The Voice* at voice@voicemagazine.org.

To receive a weekly email announcing each issue, subscribe [here](#). *The Voice* does not share its subscriber list.