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Just Thinking, 12/09/02:

A Cold Consolation

by Justin Katz

In the evening, with the roads as yet unplowed, the snow lay on the ground like a timeless curtain draped over the ages. The grown-ups walking dogs, which jumped to catch the flakes or burrowed into the mounds, and the children rushing by with sleds in tow all passed through the falling white, which drifted down and enclosed the street within a limited view – like a stage. The cars were all parked and covered, and with some changes of wardrobe and lighting, the scene could have been from any winter from the past two hundred years.

And sometimes the peacefulness of such scenes, juxtaposed with the proximate memories of holiday highways or blaring radios on the residential streets late at night, make me feel that something from years past has been lost. Horses and carriages passing on a winter's night fit the scene – not because of prejudiced imagery, but because they are slower, allowing for wandering minds through idle time. Hurrying was not then what it is now, and sometimes it's nice to be unable to hurry as we do now.

But in the past, it was perhaps not so comfortable to meander. I could not have listened to winter jazz on headphones while I walked – winter jazz being Bill Evans. John Coltrane is hot-night jazz. Miles Davis brought in both for *Kind of Blue*, creating rainy evening jazz. Was a time when there was no jazz, when one's own lips were the only instruments to orchestrate a stroll. As

for other instruments, certain families may have had more time to practice long ago, but there were fewer of those families that could afford items of such hand-made craftsmanship.

In this respect, I am like those families of old for I lack the piano for which my fingers pine. I have an electric keyboard, but that is not the same; there's not the range, the feel, or the warmth of wood and ivory. I am one more step removed from that shared experience with the composers of so many years ago. I do not have the time to practice anyway.

Herein the balance is indicated, and the mark of where advances become distractions rather than enhancements is made. It's a mark that varies by social position. A power outage gives me no opportunity to practice an electric piano but does encourage time away from the television. Piano by candlelight is something I sorely miss; lost hours to commercials are something I do not.

Then again, many of those things — productive things — piled into my days to the exclusion of others require the socially equalizing force of the computer. Writing published on the Internet may be the result of the increased freedom of decreased financial barriers, but it is vulnerable to the whims of so many sparks of energy and so many variations of ones and zeroes. A book, once printed and purchased, requires only the simpler application of light.

Shy of lost power, freedom has been the gain. If we haven't time, now, for activities that once were tedious, it is by our own doing. Television, after all, does not make a piano less capable of being used for practice. Snow provides only a nominal excuse to leave the computer, and the advantages of technology are there to propel a career after the walk is finished.

Unless, of course, unexpected problems on the part of the Web host undermine what had promised to be the biggest single day in a Web site's history. Then, the lost modernity can serve to remind us why it is we have it, although it's a cold consolation.