

Citizens of the World, Unite...

by Kelly Addy

I have been reading a book that I thought would have nothing to do with us, but it did. I thought it was about one of the more innovative information technology companies 'out there' today. It is, but it is about what is happening 'around here' too.

In *What Would Google Do?* blogger Jeff Jarvis (see www.buzzmachine.com) talks about how the online community has changed everything, and if he were king, how it would change many things even more. Industry by industry, he observes what is obvious but often unnoticed today.

We have gone from an economy of scarcity to an economy of abundance. Supply is no longer controlled by the means of production. I can shop in any store in the world at any hour of the day, and I can get what I want for a fraction of the in-store price.

Last week I walked into Best Buy looking for an SD memory card for my Android phone. I had shopped online and had been informed that it would not recognize anything larger than 32GB. I had found the best price at Amazon after slaloming through eBay, Google Shopper, NexTag.

There it was on the shelf, for about $60.00, but I had seen it online for a little less than $18.00. I found it on my phone, showed it to the clerk and they matched the online price. I am shopping everywhere in the world, no matter where I am.

The world has gone bonkers. Over at CityAttorneyTech, Pete Haskell has been trying to educate all of us on the abundance of resources out there for the asking...and the consequences to those who do not move into the blogosphere.

Pete has a point, but it all seems so impersonal. We are all becoming drones. We have no personal privacy anymore. The majority of people who send emails to my personal account are just forwarding something someone forwarded to them.

Where is The Examined Life in this? Pavlov's dogs got a better taste of reality than web surfers experience these days. We have infinite knowledge but no wisdom. We have all the answers but don't know the right answer.

Would Thomas Jefferson sit up half the night clicking on links only to realize at 3:00 a.m. that he couldn't remember what he was looking for when he started – and that it was now 3:00 a.m.?

Then it happened. Things started to come off the rails in a medium-sized town in South Carolina. The Town Counsel is a seasoned municipal lawyer and he has seen a lot of life, but this was a little larger than any issues he had dealt with in his career.

So he blogged about it with us on the Water Cooler. An investigation into an illegal online poker operation had implicated one of his council members, and the press reports made it look like that was just the tip of the iceberg. City Hall was crawling with reporters and television crews. It was dominating every conversation and nothing else was getting done.

While he never said it was getting to him, I felt overwhelmed just reading about it all 2,000 miles away. While he never asked for it, the replies started piling in from municipal practitioners all over the country.

This is a lonely job in a lot of ways. It is different from any other job at City Hall, and it is different from any other law job, too. Who would understand what we are hired to process every day?

Another municipal lawyer would. But without the listServs IMLA and the Municipal Code Corporation make available to us all, we wouldn't know very many of them, and they would not know us.

We do know each other, though, even the many listmates we have never met. While the first responses to our friend were sincere expressions of support, when the incident blossomed into something a little darker – links in the press accounts to a homicide – the conversation got to be more about business and less social.

'Who is the client?' was covered. 'How to talk to the press' came up. 'Personal safety' got a mention. Friends who understand the dynamics of a situation offered what they knew and people added to their knowledge, gave different points of view, and shared from their own stories.

The monster of a problem became just another problem to handle, and many people who had been through the kind of situation they don't prepare you for in law school – and lived! – offered steady and calm advice. One person with a problem became a human being with a team formed around him.

So back to Jeff Jarvis and *What Would Google Do?* He makes the point that what we do on the internet is to disperse information, then aggregate it, organize it, then disperse it again. All the while we are collaborating with each other, improving the final product, one post at a time.

Our friend in South Carolina is a regular contributor to the discussions about issues that arise on the job and while we are away, and we all knew he could handle what life was throwing at him. But we had just a little of this and a bit of that to share with him, things he could watch for, ways he could respond.

In the end, he could get up each day knowing that the largest online municipal law firm in the country – if not the world – 'had his back' and was ready to offer more as the situation he was in unfolded. And he was able to address his situation as a Citizen of the World. ML