



Shawn Olson's

# Creative Arts Newsletter

## The MySpace Generation

By Shawn Olson

I grew up in what you can call the MTV Generation. Emulating rock stars and rappers were the kids of my age. Things haven't changed much in that regard, but the focus of the next generation is not so much MTV and televised media as the exploding world of the Internet. The Internet has totally redefined the limits of commercialism and instant gratification to a level television could never go because of interactivity—and teenagers are eating it up like a cat licks anti-freeze.

My kids are growing up in what I would call the **MySpace Generation** (after the globally popular website MySpace.com). According to Alexa, MySpace has been the number 5 website in the world in terms of traffic. I doubt that will change anytime soon.

If you take some time to peruse MySpace you find a couple things almost immediately. First, it has a huge member base, including most bands both local and renowned. Second, the average member is probably a teenager

Could you  
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*This* for *This?*

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or college-age. That explains the lack of useful content or quality.

As much as I wish it would go away, MySpace is here to stay. But I will not let my kids get onto it... and here are some criticisms I think parents should share with their kids who insist that MySpace is "all that".

First, if you get into the MySpace world you will notice that everyone is doing exactly the same thing. This is completely ironic since many (if not all) of the people using MySpace are attempting to stick out in the crowd with their own individuality. Posting a blog to share thoughts and ideas seems like a great way to do that; but if you dig around, one "unique" person's profile seems about the same as the next. Everyone seems to post a few thoughts of the day, such as "I have nothing to say but will post something when it comes," or something like "The crowd is so fickle and I hate school." If everyone is posting the exact same things... there isn't much unique about it.

Furthermore, the network system that is the proliferating success story of MySpace where anyone can ask to be a linked "friend" of other members is actually just a sham—a self-reinforcing way to boost traffic to any and all pages but valueless in terms of content value. "I saw your profile and thought you were cool..." and "Yo thanks for the add... peace" are so prevalent but so mundane. Of what value is all this filler? And what about it makes any of the members "unique" in the way teenagers seek?

The next irony of MySpace is that its membership is so counter-culture (as to make their own culture) that it almost seems humorous that they support a solid corporate America by using MySpace. MySpace is owned by NewsCorp (Fox News), a stolidly right-wing corporate media entity.

According to some of my friends in the music world, representatives from the record label industry insist that all bands create a MySpace profile. For many bands, MySpace has supplanted the need for a standalone

website. Even Google is giving a lot of clout to MySpace, giving many MySpace pages exceptionally worthwhile page rank because of link popularity.

MySpace gives a lot of exposure to all the bands who actively expand their friends network; but the exposure from MySpace does not really produce the results bands are looking for—especially small bands trying to build up a fan-base from the bottom up. Because MySpace is so huge, and because it is global, few small bands can hope to stick out. When a small band does get "friends" to join their network, it is likely that the "friend/fan" will live hundreds or thousands of miles away. Needless to say, it's hard enough for a

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The Creative Arts Newsletter is a community educational project sponsored by Shawn Olson in Columbus, Ohio. The purpose of this newsletter is to challenge parents and children to learn more about their local world and to use their minds creatively.

This newsletter is distributed freely in Central Ohio at libraries, coffee shops and other public places.

If you would like to help with this project, feel free to call Shawn Olson at 614-276-0311. Help can come in the form of distributing copies, submitting educational material and/or helping pay for printing fees.

Learn more about Olson at [www.shawnolson.net](http://www.shawnolson.net); see Olson's keynote arts-promotion site at [www.artisticnetwork.net](http://www.artisticnetwork.net). There you will find free tools to share your creative work such as poetry, artwork, photography, music and more.

smalltime band to sell tickets to people in their hometown, let alone states, countries or continents away. In reality, a network on MySpace means very little for bands except that it offers promotional tools that local fans can use—email event alerts. Still, my company has bands who have used our server to host promotional images for MySpace events... and while the network traffic is impressively high, the turnout does not impress me even when the bands in question are highly talented and unique.

Because of its target on younger teenagers, MySpace has become a regular haunt of some sexual predators and law enforcement. Of course, the media may be blowing that angle out of proportion... but the stereotypical sexual predator is not the only threat to young people; the sheer quantity of teenagers (largely unsupervised) means that the dangers of the online world (MySpace or other similar sites) are nearly infinite—if your kid reads a thousand blogs on a popular website from similarly-aged kids talking about what is “cool”, you can pretty much guarantee that your kid will start thinking the same way— despite your angelic view of your child.

I really think that the lesson of MySpace is that our kids are young adults who are searching for a way to “fit in” even when they demand they want to be unique. It’s something all of

us went through, from the Greatest Generation to Generation X, from the MTV Generation on to the MySpace Generation. For some reason, kids can’t see that their parents were that way, and for some reason parents forget about that era in their lives.

Parents need to realize that their kids are impressionable; parents need to get involved in their kids’ lives, which includes their online activities. It’s probably a good thing when a parent reads their child’s MySpace blogs... though for most probably quite shocking. Mostly, I think it is important that parents start getting involved with the development of their kids... meaning kick out MySpace and start directing children to another place... maybe somewhere called Our Place. Kids need boundaries and direction... and if the parents don’t give it at home... they will find those boundaries and inspiration elsewhere. While I make a living on the Internet and see it as a wonderful tool... it is a totally worthless parent. But it’s the parent of the MySpace Generation. What kids learn from MySpace (and similar sites) is that standards are not *cool* and that being unique means fitting the mold of a valueless subculture.

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*Shawn Olson is a web developer, photo-journalist and father living in Columbus, Ohio. View his art, writing and photos at [www.shawnolson.net](http://www.shawnolson.net).*



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# People, Politics, Plots and Paradigms

by John Dalmas

I'm starting this with no idea where it's going. Maybe to somewhere different and interesting. Meanwhile it's being written from the viewpoint of a writer. Primarily of science fiction.

Writing novels, when it's going well, is joy. For me, certainly. Often challenging, but joy. I suspect many authors find it so, with characters, people, effects...and sometimes politics. My novel *The General's President* for example, the story and "the story universe" — replete with ideas, paradigms, plots and politics.

We're used to the words "people" and "politics" and "plots," but some of us may not have a good grip on "paradigms." Ten, fifteen years ago, if I'd ever heard the term "paradigm," it hadn't stuck. The first time I recall it, the meaning was somewhat mysterious, and it struck me as needlessly academic — a four-bit professorial term perhaps intended to impress. I wondered if it was newly coined, and looked it up in my *Oxford English Dictionary*. Turned out to be a word the ancient Greeks knew, and its first cited use in English was way back in 1483. By 1659, an explicit OED citation pretty much fits the sense of the word as widely used today: "The universe...was made exactly conformable to its Paradigme, or universal Exemplar." And in 1752: "The archetype, paradigm, exemplar, and idea, according to which all things were made."

Definitely not newly coined, suggesting how low a profile it had in recent mainstream English. A professorial word, sure, but that's appropriate enough. Professors swim in their own pools, to their own depths, by their own rules, and if we didn't have professors, we'd be the worse off.

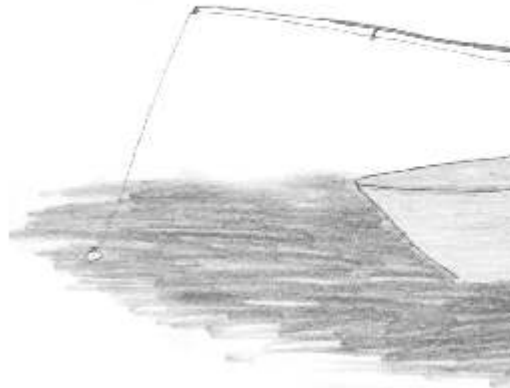
So. For our purpose, consider a paradigm as a pattern or model designed, intended, or conceived of as (theoretically) depicting some natural system, for the purpose of examination, experimentation, argument or what have you.

You might want to file that for further reference. Paradigms are useful.

Meanwhile this brief piece is intended as a piñata of observations, maybe an aphorism or two, and brief theses dealing with people, politics, plots and ideas. (Paradigms, as a special class of ideas, will be more implied here than explicit.) Also consider this a work in progress; I may improve on it.

## Basics

Language is a system of metaphor, existing in variants that differ in grammar, vocabulary, and referents. Mathematics is a language of exceptional precision and marvelous reach, but that precision grows out of laws and agreed-upon rules that limit its valid application. For example, laws requiring that relationships between variables be linear (rectilinear or curvilinear), which often they are not. And that certain of



them be independent of certain others, which also is often not true. And that appearances/measurements can be deceiving, especially when they dodge around a bit. And it can be tricky, for precision is one thing, and accuracy frequently something else.

The point here being that in the real world, those characteristics are commonly missing, and our descriptions and predictions are accordingly...well, consider weather forecasting, and environmental modeling in general. Environmental modeling is very valuable in exploring how things work, but as predictors they are uncertain. Fallible.

Still, mathematics is broadly useful. And like all language, repeated use of mathematics literally programs the brain to accommodate the tools it provides. Enabling the creative aspects of mind to enlarge on that language. And to enlarge the analytical and creative powers of the ensouled life form — in our case human beings.

And if even our best descriptive and analytical tools are more or less faulty, consider our predictions, hopes, fears, prospects!

“We dwell in a physical universe not designed for the convenience or indulgence of humans or other incarnate souls. Intelligence, diligence, and good intentions do not necessarily produce security, comfort, or pleasure. There are no guarantees.

“One can try, and one can hope, but one’s expectations are often disappointed. On the other hand, today’s victories sometimes lead to tomorrow’s woes, while out of today’s woes may grow tomorrow’s blessings. The roots of joys and griefs can be distant in both time and place, so it is well to be light on your feet, and not too fixed in your desires.” (From page 4 of *The Lion Returns*, by John Dalmas; Baen Books 1999. From the lips — well, the mind — of a most different philosopher. A half-ton wild boar!)

This adds surprise — spice, zest — to life. Like horse radish — sometimes hotter than one might like.

Speaking of metaphors: Think of the universe as a holistic, n-dimensional matrix, in constant motion in each dimension simultaneously. Some



of the constituent movements are like a bowl of water at a slow boil, or a rolling boil, or a mountain stream, with rapids galloping, boulders, eddies, deep holes, beaver flowages, cutbanks... Let those dimensions manifest in color, the whole thing an infinitely nuanced whole.

A dynamic system, a dance eternally evolving.

Obviously this sketch is extremely metaphorical.

Taking a different approach, imagine a moving continuum of fractals. Of mixed fractals! A metaphor providing a different sense of the universe and relationship, tapping more deeply it's emotional and esthetic aspects.

Listen to Stravinsky's rich and glorious *Firebird Suite*, or the deep beauty of Borodin's *On the Plains of Central Asia*. And finally, from polar or subpolar regions, watch a display of the aurora, mesmerizingly — almost heart-stoppingly — beautiful!

### ***The General's President (Baen, 1988)***

So. System models are Paradigms of a sort. But where do Plots and Politics come in here? In fact, especially in science fiction, writers often explore ideas in a novel. The ideas may be the core of the story, or stage settings, or courses in the dinner. But exploration is popular, and among the most popular — most interesting and captivating — are explorations of persons by persons.

Theoretical physicists sometimes create a thought experiment, visualizing a set of circumstances, factors, and “particles,” and what could/might/must result, based on available understandings. Some science-fiction stories resemble thought experiments.

That's the game I played when writing *The General's President*. The geogravitic power converter was not the main idea. The main idea was to explore “what might transpire if: a, in the presence of b, is acted upon by c.”

My purpose in writing “President” was to explore some thoughts on

what might develop if, in the 1990s, we had another Great Depression, and a new Roosevelt-like president took on the job of salvaging our society, democracy, and self confidence. I intended it to feel real, to be thought-provoking and enjoyable. (It certainly provoked some people! Nearly twenty years after publication, you can find angry or grouchy reviews of it on Amazon.com.)

And writing it took a lot of time, because (1) it was long, and (2) I had to make it plausible. Many science fiction readers require plausibility. Thus I did (for me) a lot of reading (I do not read rapidly), for example of publicly available military and geopolitical analyses of world trouble spots in the mid-1980s, and books by Soviet defectors — generals and journalists — on the Soviet army, the GRU, the KGB, the Kremlin....

I also made a lot of phone calls. For example to the Secret Service, regarding the White House nuclear shelter (ha ha! Good luck, John), and the White House switchboard regarding fireplaces (gas-burning? wood? “Why wood, of course”). Guided by a Park Service employee over the telephone, I sketched a diagram of the observation floor of the Washington Monument, where I had never been...

As the deadline approached for the completed manuscript, I realized I was in trouble. I quit working out, quit running, cut back on sleep, switched to real coffee, in quantities, and delivered the manuscript in time for the book to reach the stores by the 1988 New Hampshire presidential primary.

An inveterate information junky, I immensely enjoyed writing it.

In that era before Amazon.com, or even the web, I got quite a bit of mail (and some phone calls) regarding “Prez.” Meanwhile the experience completed my change from card-carrying Libertarian to vanilla populist, with a general preference for Tom Foley pragmatic democrats (small d, friend, small d).

So, thought experiments, a species of metaphor. Not to be confused

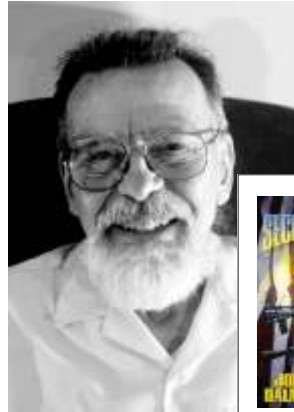


with reality, they should nonetheless resemble key parts of it. They're useful in exploring ideas, exercising the minds of the author and readers.

There! Did we get somewhere? Or more important, how was the trip? Thought provoking? Depends on the reader.

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*John Dalmas is a science fiction author with 27 published novels. He recently moved to Central Ohio with his wife Gail. Learn more about Dalmas at [www.sfw.org/members/dalmas/](http://www.sfw.org/members/dalmas/).*



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### Columbus Locales

R D B A G U T R S B R A I C Y  
E E E N U R B A N C R E S T L  
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#### Word List

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| <input type="checkbox"/> Bexley     | <input type="checkbox"/> Hilliard     |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Columbus   | <input type="checkbox"/> Obetz        |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Dublin     | <input type="checkbox"/> Reynoldsburg |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Gahanna    | <input type="checkbox"/> Urbancrest   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Grove City | <input type="checkbox"/> Westerville  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Groveport  | <input type="checkbox"/> Whitehall    |

Get answers for this word search at <http://www.shawnolson.net/a/1359/columbus-locales.html> . Create your own word searches for the classroom, refrigerator or your website at <http://www.word-search-maker.webonizer.com> .



# Return to Norton Middle School

By Shawn Olson

I recently had the opportunity to spend the day shadowing a teacher from my childhood. Gary Sigrist at Norton Middle School was gracious enough to let me accompany him through an entire day in his eighth grade science class. The experience was highly rewarding and educational for me... not to mention a little challenging to my views on my own education.

As a student I coasted through school. I was (and still am) one of those lucky people who naturally learns new things easily and quickly. Because of this trait, I am sometimes blinded by the challenges that people can face in school and life. While we are all of equal value, we are not all of equal capacity, talent, inclination and passion; furthermore, we are not all raised with the same set of moral values.

As I spent the day in Gary's classroom I was forced to peel off some of the hardened skin that has grown on me over the years, as my heart opened to some of the challenges that a modern teacher is facing. These challenges were no mystery to my mind... but the conservatism of aging and parenting has dimmed the emotional perspective on educational dilemmas.

As I sat in the classroom I was amazed at how wrong my perspective was about Gary. As a preteen and young teenager I developed a heavy amount of respect for him that has lasted for years. But my memory of him was not totally accurate—in my mind he was a stern man who demanded respect. I have rationalized that this alone is what caused me to respect him long after I left his classroom and school and am leading my own life and career and family. As the moments went by and I watched Gary and his classes, however, things started to come back to me that I had forgotten. He was still as stern as I remembered with serious infractions...

but it was not all bullwhipping that made up his repertoire.

He told jokes and teased intelligently. He is an expert punster. He uses interactive games and rewards that play into the natural instincts of kids. I found myself smirking over and over as the day went on... and the kids too enjoyed his teasing and play on words. While many of the kids may not have been overly enthusiastic about Science or plate tectonics (that was the subject of the day) they paid attention because they were interested in Gary's presentation of the subject.

Between classes or at lunch I mentioned to Gary that I had forgotten his comedic side. He said, "You know, if I didn't have a sense of humor, I don't think I could do this job." He said that part of his personal challenge every day is to make sure that every single kid that comes to his classroom has an opportunity to enjoy the class.

The day wore on and one classroom was followed by another. I saw a side of teaching that is obvious to any teacher but is easily missed by students and non-teachers. Repetition.

All the classrooms were on the same course. Gary had to present the same content to each new classroom but stay as fresh as he was at the beginning of the day. For a man with a desk job, I was unprepared to stand on a hard floor for eight hours, and I marveled at Gary's stamina. It wasn't until the last class of the day that he sat for a significant amount of time at the front of the class—but still he was smiling for the kids and keeping his jokes lively. I had personally heard enough about reverse faults, strike-slip faults, Primary Waves and Secondary waves, but Gary kept the kids feeling like this lesson was for them personally even though the same lessons were repeated throughout the day.

Gary is also a police officer. So he has a unique perspective on the problems facing many of the kids in his classes. "I see some of the neighborhoods these kids come from. For many

of these kids, this is the only safe place they know.”

One young man walked by us in the hallway on his way from one class to another. Gary said, “See that young man. He’s a member of a gang. His second child is on the way.”

These kids are in middle school. Do their parents not know about these things? What can be done?

Gary did not profess to have all the answers. But he said, “You can’t save them all. All you can do is show them respect and show them a safe place where everyone is expected to respect one another.”

An influx of immigrants in the last decade has increased the number of students who do not speak English. While I witnessed some minor animosity to that fact from at least one staff member, Gary seemed genuinely concerned about finding ways to help these English as a Second Language (ESL) students learn English and succeed in the classroom. Whatever your political stance on immigration in America, you ought not show animosity towards the children of immigrants—as they are innocent children who go with their fami-

lies as your children would go with you wherever you might go.

Modern schools face many of the same challenges that historic schools faced. Non-English speaking immigrants are not specific to the here and now but have been an issue since America was first colonized. Funding for schools has been a challenge unsolved for as long as anyone has been visionary enough to want to be a teacher. Gangs exist in all places where wealth is an unrealistic expectation (in the minds of the poor).

My personal opinion is that most kids grow up and fail because their *parents* fail to educate them (morally as much as intellectually). For kids who have no worthy parental role models... school is one of the few places where they have a chance to learn. People like Gary Sigrist make the whole process of formal schooling (as flawed as it may be) accomplish great things. As a student I learned to respect him; as a parent interested in education, I finally realize how valuable of a resource any teacher like him is to the community.

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## Did You Know?

Most school districts now have websites that give you important information about schools, policies and contact numbers. Below are some local school web addresses for Central Ohio.

**Bexley City Schools** - <http://www.bexley.k12.oh.us>

**Columbus City Schools** - <http://www.columbus.k12.oh.us>

**Dublin City Schools** - <http://www.dublinschools.net>

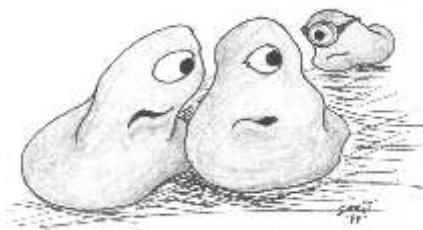
**Hilliard City Schools** - <http://www.hilliard.k12.oh.us>

**South-Western City Schools** - <http://www.swcs.k12.oh.us>

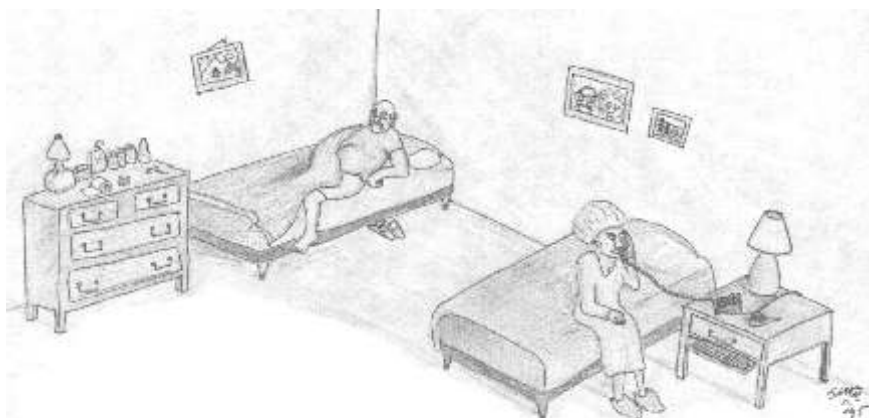
**Westerville City Schools** - <http://www.westerville.k12.oh.us>

**Whitehall City Schools** - <http://www.whitehall.k12.oh.us>

In August 2007 you will be able to find links to most central Ohio schools at [www.columbusguide.net](http://www.columbusguide.net) .



*Sh! Here comes Two-Eyes!*



*"Darnit, Melva! George is getting up on the wrong side of bed again!"*

## Final Word

In closing, I must apologize for taking so long to get this second issue out. I originally intended to print these newsletters once a month; time restraints have since taught me that I am not as much a superman as I thought! If I get four out a year I will be happy.

I do add content to my personal website fairly frequently (most of the articles you will find in this newsletter will also be on my site).

The goal of this newsletter is to encourage, educate, inspire and challenge the community to raise standards

in all aspects of our lives--both personal and social. Anyone who has something meaningful to say that fits into this mold is welcome to submit articles, photos and art for this newsletter (as my friend John Dalmas did in this issue).

The next issue will include articles on statistics and how the advertising industry, special interest groups, political campaigns and media outlets often misuse or outright abuse statistical information. If you did not get a copy of the first issue or miss the next one, download it on my website from the Printed Newsletter page. Stay safe and creative!



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