



Exploding the multitasker myth: This cell-phoning, coffee-sipping, text-messaging driver is a menace.

instead of the hippocampus, a region that stores and facilitates the recall of information. Widespread multitasking may produce a generation of very quick but very shallow thinkers, according to Jane Healy, an educational psychologist.

William James, the Harvard psychologist, wrote in the late 19th century that the youthful mind is characterized by an “extreme mobility of the attention,” and that the transition from youthful distraction to mature concentration is a matter of discipline and character. Some people, James said, never move beyond getting their work done only in the “interstices of their mind-wandering.”

Rosen reasons that multitaskers may simply adjust to constant stimulation and block it out like airplane noise overhead. But given the evidence so far, she writes, “intentional self-distraction could well be profoundly detrimental to individual and cultural well-being.” When people conduct business only in the

“interstices of their mind-wandering,” the world may gain information, but at the expense of wisdom.

#### SOCIETY

## In Praise of Renting

**THE SOURCE:** “Cleaning House” by Joshua Rosner, in *The New Republic*, May 7, 2008.

TOO MANY AMERICANS OWN their own home, writes Joshua Rosner, managing director of a research consultancy. Lots of them would be better off if they had never drunk the Kool-Aid of near-universal homeownership. And so would the public. The federal government made the mistake of allowing the housing and financial services industries to suck risky buyers into the housing market with such novel instruments as no-money-down mortgages and repayment schedules that ballooned years later. Buyers were encouraged to purchase

homes they couldn’t afford, had no equity in, and had little incentive to maintain.

Now that they’ve created this mess, politicians shouldn’t be propping up borrowers and lenders with tax credits that encourage more spending, Rosner argues. And they shouldn’t be pouring taxpayers’ money down a rathole by trying to keep families in unaffordable dwellings. Many troubled borrowers should just mail back their keys and sign over title to their overpriced house to avoid foreclosure. Most lenders would be better off too, because they wouldn’t have to pay the costs of foreclosing on somebody who has lost all motivation to keep up the property. The former debtors could rent, and save for something affordable.

Real estate prices have risen faster than wages for most of the last 40 years, so families thought they had to get their foot on the ladder before the first rung rose completely out of reach. Ownership jumped from its usual level of between 62 and 64 percent to almost 70 percent, Rosner says, but the market’s natural equilibrium was disturbed by the government’s attempts at social engineering.

Americans created an “economic mirage” by allowing the appreciation in home values to substitute for the return on labor in estimating their personal wealth, Rosner argues. Instead of artificially stimulating home buying, federal officials should focus on policies that increase real, not illusory, prosperity. They should concentrate on supporting wage growth. They should spend public money on “strengthen-

ing America's economic foundation" (he suggests investing in schools to reeducate displaced workers and in highways to link rural and suburban workers to jobs), rather than helping people buy McMansions.

Homeownership is a good thing as long as it allows families to build a stake not only in their house but in their community as well, Rosner concludes. But "a home without equity is really just a rental with debt."

## SOCIETY

## Ghost Bird

**THE SOURCE:** "Bottomland Ghost: Southern Encounters and Obsessions With the Ivory-Billed Woodpecker" by Michael K. Steinberg, in *Southern Cultures*, Spring 2008.

THE IVORY-BILLED WOODPECKER has fascinated the public since Native Americans used the bird's skins to carry medicine bundles and traded its remains as far

north as Canada. John James Audubon compared the beauty of its stunning plumage and prominent bill to the works of Flemish painter Anthony Vandyke, and it inspired writers such as William Faulkner and Walker Percy. But relentless hunting and the disappearance of the ivory-bill's habitat in southern bottomland forests took their toll. The last documented sightings were in the 1940s.

Over the years, bird experts and rural residents reported occasional sightings, but their claims were ridiculed, writes Michael K. Steinberg, a geographer at the University of Alabama. "Few die-hards seem capable of believing that anybody else—whether a knowledgeable outdoors person or even a respected ornithologist—could actually see or hear an ivory-bill." So when a team of scientists declared in 2005 that they had laid eyes on an ivory-bill in eastern Arkansas, and produced a fuzzy 11-second video as evidence,

there was much rejoicing about this "official" sighting. But skeptics have questioned whether the video shows the famous bird or its common, similar-looking relative, the pileated woodpecker.

Such disputes are frequent in the scientific world. But because "the ivory-bill is the Holy Grail among birders," and because millions in federal money for conservation efforts hang in the balance, the debate stirs deep passions among both ornithologists and rural residents such as Steinberg's neighbor who, after a few drinks, often threatens to "go into the swamp and 'find that damn bird.'"

What really ruffles Steinberg's feathers is the marginalization of locals who report glimpsing the elusive woodpecker. "These people are often far more familiar with the sights and sounds of deep swamps than academics or birders who seldom venture into southern bayous," he says. Local hunters and fishers are also the

## EXCERPT

## Plugged In, Left Behind

*In recent years I have administered a dumbed-down quiz on current events and history early in each semester. . . . Results have been, well, horrifying. Nearly half of a recent class could not name a single country that bordered Israel. In an introductory journalism class, 11 of 18 students could not name what country Kabul was in, although we have been at war there for half a decade. . . .*

*It is hard to reconcile [college] students' lack of knowledge with the notion that they are a part of the celebrated information age, creatures of the Internet who*

*arguably have at their disposal more information than all the preceding generations combined. Despite their BlackBerrys, cell phones, and Wi-Fi, they are, in their own way, as isolated as the remote tribes of New Guinea. They disprove the notion that technology fosters engagement, that connectivity and community are synonymous. . . .*

*The noted American scholar Robert M. Hutchins said, decades ago . . . that "the death of a democracy is not likely to be an assassination from ambush. It will be a slow extinction from apathy, indifference, and undernourishment." I fear he was right.*

—TED GUP, professor of journalism at Case Western Reserve University and author, most recently, of *Nation of Secrets: The Threat to Democracy and the American Way of Life*, in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, (April 11, 2008)