

Research Notes

Analyzing the Philosophical Undertones of *The Christian Science Monitor's* Home Forum

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研究ノート

米紙クリスチャン・サイエンス・モニターの家庭欄 「ホーム・フォーラム」の哲学的基底についての一分析

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Abstract

The Christian Science Monitor established in 1908 emphasized the home page as a place to discuss the meaning of everyday things around us; poetry, music, literature, and other forms of arts included. The purpose of this brief note is to clarify the philosophical characteristics in the Home Forum articles. The author tries to compare the origins of the “depth”, meaning, and sustained interests which are *the Monitor's* standards to those in the Home Forum pages.

要 旨

米紙クリスチャン・サイエンス・モニターの創刊（1908年）当時からある「ホーム・フォーラム」は、日本の新聞の「家庭欄」に該当する。この欄のユニークさは、その哲学性にある。「ホーム・フォーラム」は、100年来の方針として内外に知られる「背景分析」「何年も持ち越す永続的なテーマ」が、この欄に反映されているのではないかと筆者の考えを提示する。日常的な衣食住、自然、動植物、文化・芸術（無名の人々の詩など）、家族・人・自然をテーマとし、意味の発見を、まるで隠し味のようにしのばせている。この奥ゆか

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しさこそ、「ホーム・フォーラム」の質の高さを示す特質である。哲学の発祥は、自分を知ることである。本稿は、日常的な事柄のなかに深い意味を見出すことがいかにして「自分を知る」ことと結びつくのかを明らかにする。

The Christian Science Monitor has stayed away from the sensationalism-side of the newspaper journalism when the paper's founder, Mrs. Mary Baker Eddy, mentioned the bad effects that the sensationalism might produce on the readers. (Oda, 2013) Assuming that the newspaper sensationalism is the least likely quality of a good newspaper, Mrs. Eddy made a cornerstone statement about the contents of *the Monitor*: it must be a paper that can be read "at home" and this led to the establishment of the high criteria in the articles and stories of the Home Forum. Amidst of the prevalence of low-quality sensationalism in the early 1900s in the United States, *The Christian Science Monitor* clarified high standards.

The sensationalism-free editorial policy was consistent throughout the sections of *the Monitor*. Generally speaking, the "family" pages of any newspaper might be understood as free from sensationalism, but when it comes to using celebrities and interviewing "trendy people" to attract the readers attention, a newspaper is risking becoming part of sensationalism. The things familiar and ordinary are likely to be uninteresting as they are, so the editors of the Home Forum of *the Christian Science Monitor* seemed to put on something extraordinary in the pages of the Home Forum.

1. Defining "Who I am" and "What I am"

In a nutshell, the Home Forum is not merely a collection of pleasing stories about homely things. One distinctive feature of the Home Forum is the lack of "famous people" in them, and the following excerpt of Mr. John Yemma succinctly explains the reason.

A supportive reader recently applauded *the Monitor* for its "low celebrity factor." Thanks. It would be nice to be celebrity-free.....Fascination with fame permeates the media and occupies the daydreams of millions. So in that sense it is news, although gossip and celebrity do seem to be building into a bubble of irrational exuberance. (Yemma, 2009)

I was surprised at the phrase "daydreaming of millions." If the end-product of jour-

nalism is to provide the readers with endless source of daydreaming, the journalism as such is doing harm, not good, to the public. Day-dreaming, according to this excerpt, has an element of exuberance. Day-dreaming and exuberance have one thing in common; the lack of inward quality of thinking. Although the day-dreamers may appear to have their own world views, that kind of awareness is far from being original. In fact, the day-dreaming has no quality to claim; it is merely a perpetuation of outside-imposed illusions.

After reading a dozen of the church publications and dozens of the Home Forum articles, I was able to arrive at a conclusion that the Home Forum articles were meant to provide the readers with the opposite values; the self-knowledge through thinking deeply. Here is how I came to this conclusion. Timely, I came across feature articles on the Christian Science nursing in the July, 2012 issue in the *Christian Science Journal*.

Although I had been a reader of *the Monitor* for years, I had never been exposed to a very specific corner in the entire thinking of the Christian Science. That corner was “self-knowledge”. The closing remark of Mrs. Mary Ridgway’s article “Binding Up Broken Hearts” is illustrative. (Ridgway, 2012: p.23)

Mrs. Eddy explains the importance of self-knowledge in her article “The Way,” where she says that self-knowledge is the first stage of growth that mortal mind must pass through for good healing.....

I think that self-knowledge is a primary element in healing.....

At first, I did not understand the role the self-knowledge plays. This article is about healing experiences in nursing, and I thought that self-knowledge that Mrs. Ridgway mentioned in this article was about the healing mechanism that could take place when a person, whether suffering an illness or not, tries looking at his or her foundation of values. On a close reading of the article, however, my eyes stopped at the following statement about knowing ourselves.

This statement from *Science and Health* was very helpful: “We should examine ourselves and learn what is the affection and purpose of the heart, for in this way only can we know what we honestly are”(p.8). I so wanted to learn who and what I am.

Being brought up in a non-Christian family background, I have been unable to grasp the significance this statement bears. Why does “knowing who I am and what I am” bring a person into a new level of understanding? Are the ordinary people not looking at

the core of their being? What is the difference between shallowness and depth in looking at one's own identities? These questions have been with me since I started thinking about the values we have.

At the same time, I have been returning to the Ridgeway article for an inspiration on the place of "home." Her article is a product of the nursing and healing experiences in the hospitals and the homes of a number of people. It may sound strange, but I cannot admit that "self-knowledge" is the beginning of finding one's own voice, as is often said in the practices in education. "Self-knowledge" also means "meaning-making." After all, "home" is where one's identity is formed and the meanings are made. Thus understood, I came to embrace a different view on the Home Forum; it was no longer the page for dealing with gardening tips and the likes.

The Home Forum and its philosophy of self-knowledge suddenly became an important guideline in my own teaching profession. I have been teaching in a nursing school for several years. For a couple of years, I have heavily relied on the philosophy of the Home Forum in connecting the ordinary facts in the students' everyday life with the meaning-making. I have done this kind of writing exercise in a course titled "logical thinking" in the nursing school, to be surprised each year by the quality of essays. In fact, I had not expected that knowing "who I am" and "what I am" could bring about this level of self-awareness among the students. It was a revealing exercise for the students, as I was later told, to know "who I am" and "what I am" by ourselves, and "how can I deal with the patients who had lived under the deeper sense of who I am and what I am?" Here are a few excerpts from the class essays of the students.

- (1) Nothing remains in my life, if it were not for skiing.
- (2) I have never felt as close to a person as I felt to my beloved cat.
- (3) Cooking is at the center of my life. Everything evolves around it.
- (4) Never have I examined systematically who I am. Through this course, I was able to cast doubt on the shallow sense of the self which is manufactured by the media outlets. I didn't recognize that my values were being shaped by the media. Those people who have not examined who they are and what they are may probably be able to lead a good life materially, but I really doubt that kind of happiness is genuine.
- (5) For a countless occasions, I have seen good deeds by others, and these experiences have made me hope to be a nurse, as an reciprocal service to others in my own way.

The students successfully focused their life-long experiences in a theme or two. The

deeper they looked into the theme, the sharper their identities get. This finding of mine was two-fold: one is that the philosophical nature of the *Christian Science Monitor's* Home Forum is verified in the students essays, and the other is that “home” and its related items are deeply embedded in the value formation process of the students. Regarding the first one, I should point out that “knowing who I am and what I am” is a strong catalyst of any intellectual endeavor. Regarding the second, I can only relate that the young people I know have marvelous stories to tell, and these stories are mostly “homely.”

2. “Meaning-Making” Versus “Fame Machinery”

The ordinary themes can be written in the form of information. Yet, the same theme can be written as a thought-provoking essay. What makes them different is the depth of observation and insight. If the editors of the Home Forum placed values on “trends” and “fads” in everyday life, the pages would be full of entertaining information. This is not true of Home Forum. Regarding the *Christian Science Monitor* and the Home Forum as the vehicle of meaning-making, depth, background analysis, and long-lasting interests, the following examples are relevant. Being an amateur musician (a harpist, to be exact), I have a keen interest in the way the Home Forum describes music. I quote an article on a choral rehearsal (Austin, 1989) Although this article is about a concert experience, there is much about the rehearsal process.

The whole character of the music—Verdi’s music—was suddenly illuminated from the inside out. My confidence in our interpretation of the music soared. I heard the canyons and mountains in the frugal passages that I hadn’t been aware of before.

This description typically shows the kind of meaning-making and depth at work. Is the Home Forum the right page to carry this article in? Perhaps the art pages might be an appropriate vehicle. But, I think this is what makes the Home Forum unique in its own right. There is something philosophical about the viewpoint, and yet, this piece is not written by a choral director.

The following quotation is found in the interview with a painter Wolf Kahn (Hury, 1989) I can see an obvious manifestation of the meaning-making. I would like to pin-point the statement about a painter’s “danger point.”

Danger point means that people are not used to. If somebody comes along and says, "That painting's too sweet," it means that they can't deal with the fact that you're doing a set of color relations that actually they've seen last on a candy package. Or a perfume ad. And yet you're not doing a perfume ad, you're doing a painting. And a painting has to represent your most deeply considered sense of life. Which is, that it has to have a sense of gravity to it, contrast, austerity. When you're getting to danger points, you're working in fairly new ground,..... (p.32)

I may pose the same question. Isn't the art page a more appropriate place for this kind of detailed account of the use of colors? Considering the impacts this article might have on the readers of the Home Forum, I find the "home page" is still the right choice. The amateur painters will be encouraged to use the colors more wildly after reading this interview. The new meaning of colors. Finding a new meaning in an ordinary theme is a demanding journalistic discretion. People may feel that this level of technical discussions are far from being "homely," but Home Forum typically tries to do this.

My harp teacher used to say that finding a new meaning in the music notations is very important. It is true that the motions of the fingers are written in the notations, but the harpist must read the connections between what is written and what is not. New meanings are available for those who can read deeply.

3. Depth and Sustained Interests

The value of the newspaper journalism, generally speaking, lies in showing the public the background and depth of issues. Most people might assume that the "home" pages of a newspaper cannot perform this task. This is not true in regard to the Home Forum of the *Monitor*. I should quote the opening sentence of the introduction in an anthology called *A Home Forum Reader*. (Hunter, 1989).

Journalism around the world offers few examples of section unique to the newspaper. The *Christian Science Monitor's* Home Forum is such an exception. Unique to the *Monitor*, the Home Forum seeks to answer the *Monitor's* special charge not merely to publish facts and trends and analyses of them, but also to provide readers with material of lasting interest. (p. II)

The Home Forum is understood as a unique vehicle where the things ordinary are examined from the lenses of depth and “lasting interest.” I think that the Home Forum has achieved this unique task of crossing the border between “the ordinary and homely” and “depth and sustained interests.”

Let me provide you with an illustration. The following is an excerpt from an essay titled “Spring, and Already Apples.” (Klose, 1997) The story begins with a mention to the “great things outdoor,” but this is a typical Home Forum article when the essayist quotes lines from Robert Frost.

He is a biochemist, and I have seen him at professional meetings, discussing this or that chemical reactions, when suddenly someone asks him about his orchard. Like a ship drawn into a whirlpool, he yields to the inevitable. “Now you’ve done it,” he says, “you’ve got me going on those apples.” From that moment on, the talks never returned to molecules. He cannot help it.

Here is shown an example of a “sustained interest.” The interests are like a port that a person can return to at any time. For the essayist of the “Spring, and Already Apples,” apples are a port. He continued coming back to the topic of orchard. The interests are sustained because they are “deep” and endlessly interesting. Apples are the most typical. Reading this, I am reminded of an American writer-poet, Wendell Berry, whose passionate advocacy of doing one thing deeply sometimes centers on studying a single tree for a number of years.

My own experience has shown me that it is possible to live in and attentively study the small place decade after decade, and find that it ceaselessly evades and exceeds comprehension. (Berry, 2000, p.139)

A single tree? Well, life is a miracle and therefore infinitely of interest anywhere. We have perhaps enough testimony, from artists and scientists both, that if we watch, refine our intelligence and our attention, curb our greed and our pride, work with care, have faith, a single tree might be enough. (Berry, 2000, p.142)

I do not think this is an exaggeration. A tree study might be one’s life-long pursuit. The problem is that little attention has been given to the remarkable job of studying a thing in nature. I suppose the Home Forum has made lonely effort to restore the forgot-

ten art of studying simple things in nature.

Examples abound, but a piece about gardening by Christopher Andreae is still another proof in which the long-term interests are respected as a sustained pursuit in life.

I have long been an advocate of (un)calculated untidiness and weeds by the hundreds, and let me tell you, oh-you-dreaming-horticultural-idealist-author, you are, with regard to slugs, talking through your hat. (Andreae, 1996)

This essay begins with a historical reference in the 1770s to the writings of Joseph Addison (1672-1719) and the 18th parson Gilbert White. Gardening has been one of the most sustained interests in anyone's life.

The tendency of the general public to be attracted by something fashionable is a sign of the human weakness. Very few people are drawn to things of the lasting interests. The Home Forum has been a treasure trove of the American newspaper journalism in that the long-lasting themes are treated with respect.

When we talk about "depth" in reporting, we are mentioning something that lies beneath the surface of things, perhaps in a form of a new discovery. I might as well quote from Erwin D. Canham's seminal book the *Christian Science Monitor, Commitment to Freedom*.

In short, *the Monitor's* entertainment values reach below the surface of mere pleasure. They bind the relationship together and to the paper. They are the essence of home and family. And all this, too, is part of the paper's purposes. For it is speaking to a great many people whose major interest is the home. (Canham, 1958, p.363)

What a wonderful way to define the center of life in our life! In the 1950s, it was still possible to regard the home as the center of our life, but is it now? The transition of the center of our life is crucial in thinking about the quality of life. The 1950s was the time when the television industry began to take most of the time people spent at home.

I should clarify what is meant by "surface" and "depth." The Home Forum obviously took a position of not looking at the surface phenomena even when an essay or a story is dealing with ordinary, everyday things. A brief review of the Home Forum articles during the past several decades indicates that the topics to be covered were so ordinary that these articles might appear superficial to the untrained eyes.

It is meaningful to cast light on the way the Home Forum was idealistically envision-

ed in the 1950s if we are to know what value changes had occurred during these six decades.

Again I may draw on the ideas that Mr. Canham espoused as the cornerstones of the Home Forum. Although a set of new cultural norms were taking place in the 1950s, Mr. Canham was asserting that the criteria of *the Monitor's* cultural pages, the poetry pages in particular, was unwavering. Although he was mentioning the selection criteria of poetry, he seemed to be applying that criteria to other areas of cultural endeavors. "The vulgarity and the moral drifting" (Canham, 1958, p.363) was to be rejected by the Home Forum editors.

Fictions were not the only genre in degrading the public standard of goodness. There were other, more potent media-outlets. I think the 1950s was the era when the television industry had embarked on its wild inroads into the American culture. The film-making industry was soon to be a mainstream in the way the Americans were entertained.

Defining "depth" as such, I can find some justification in saying that the Home Forum of *the Christian Science Monitor* is much more philosophical than most of the counterparts in the major city newspapers in the United States.

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