July 2014

Ties that bind…sort of

Michael Gaston

I had always believed that the Virtual Community was, well, virtual. Not really there. In someone's mind. Sort of like the Twilight Zone. Not so.

A year ago I ventured down to the Apple campus in Cupertino hoping to gain some insights into operating a local area network. The "Ties That Bind" conference sounded promising (even if the title sounds a bit kinky). I imagined that I would benefit from a solid introduction to hubs, routers, servers, and productivity tools. I hoped at the very least to come to some sort of epiphany regarding frame-relay clouds. Perhaps I would soon understand those strange network diagrams that seem to feature Zeus and Jupiter exchanging lighting bolts across the State's lata lines.

Guest Editorial:
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by Michael Gaston

My first disappointment was Cupertino. I had imagined that the Apple Campus would be located in some sort of pastoral setting with ponds, grass, and roving swans. You know, something holistic. Cupertino is pavement, glass, and freeways. There probably are some charming places somewhere in the area, but I didn't find them. The Apple Campus certainly isn't one of them.

Think of the Pentagon and you pretty much capture the flavor of Apple's main complex. A number of buildings kind of fit together like pieces of pie with a small park in the center. All the Apple employees snack on the benches in the park. It is probably very nice, but I wouldn't know. I didn't have security clearance to enter that inner sanctum. I think they have had trouble with lunch theft. Maybe that's where they keep the swans.

While the local architecture seems to feature sharp edges and locked doors, the conference took on a dreamlike essence that was hard to tie down. Several hundred leaders in community networking were gathered together from all over the world under one roof. Or series of roofs. Or however you would describe that structure. Many had communicated with one another for years, but had never met. There was more than one joyous reunion between virtual friends who experienced a brief period of disorientation as they adjusted to one another's physical forms. (Perhaps this is all a good argument for the WEB or some other graphical interface.)

The mix was something to see. The "suits" were there in force. Big Buck corporations with dollars signs in their eyes. "Widgets will be exchanged over a commerce net, and where widgets are exchanged profit will be made!"

Hyperlinked subcontractors and all that.

The suits were balanced well by a large group of advocates who share a keen vision of the virtual community. It's tempting to stereotype this group as "ex-hippies," but the description doesn't hold true. (Both Al Gore and Newt Gingrich, neither of whom were at the conference, advocate the use of cyberspace to reshape the world. Think about that for a moment.) This group believes that the emergence of community networks will help create a smaller world where enhanced communication will break down the barriers that create so many problems in our civilization. Unless someone charges for it.

The third group in attendance consisted of service providers, mostly educators and librarians. This group reiterated the possibility of and need for collegiality. Unfettered resource sharing seemed to be the primary goal. "Partnership" was the byword. "We need to work together," was the refrain. Unless a federal grant is at stake, was the exception.

Libraries were praised and panned at the conference. For every advocate that cited public libraries as a critical component in the effort to provide equal access to the benefits of community networks, there was a detractor who proclaimed the imminent demise of our institution as the world comes on-line. Who needs a middle-man? More than one grass-roots organizer argued for increased funding to create public institutions to organize and govern the provision of information services at the local level without realizing that public libraries pretty much do just that. Half the commercial institutions viewed the libraries as potential markets, the other half viewed them as threats.

Having attended the "Ties That Bind" conference, I feel that, like Moses, I scaled a mountain to receive a revelation. But the message I received was more in the form of an oracle that a commandment, and it was far from chiseled in stone. The virtual community is in flux, and it is seeking definition. The message: we can either help define the role libraries will play, or we can have that role defined for us.

I'm excited about this first issue of the OLA Quarterly because it provides an overview of the enterprising work which will help to define that role. My impression is that a lot of exciting progress is underway. Though we have a long way to go, the journey has begun.

Now if someone will explain frame-relay clouds to me in lay terms ...