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Syracuse University Magazine (USPS 009-049, ISSN 1065-884X) Volume 19, Number 4, is an official bulletin of Syracuse University and is published four times yearly: spring, summer, fall, and winter by Syracuse University, Syracuse NY 13244. It is distributed free of charge to alumni, friends, faculty, and staff. Periodical postage paid at Syracuse, NY, and additional mailing offices.

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OTHER MAGAZINE BUSINESS: *Syracuse University Magazine,* 820 Comstock Avenue, Room 308, Syracuse NY 13244-5040. Telephone: 315-443-2233; Fax: 315-443-5425. E-mail: *jacox@syr.edu.* Web site: *sumagazine.syr.edu.*

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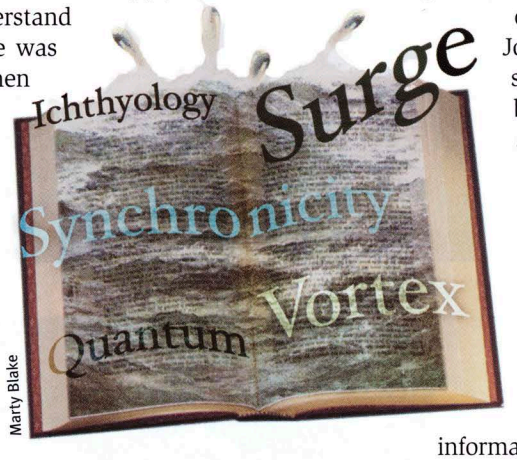
Opening Remarks

Overcoming the Transubstantial Blues

Lately I've wanted to be a hydrogeologist. The reason is simple: When a well digger hauled his rig into my backyard a few months ago and started drilling for depths unknown in search of a sufficient water supply, I wanted to understand what the heck he was talking about. When he said he'd "surge" the well one more time, I nodded my head in agreement, as if I were an astute hydrogeologist. But little did I know, until I scampered onto the Internet, that surging involves pumping water into Mother Earth with extreme pressure, causing bedrock to fracture and hopefully draw water into the well through cracked seams. "If you need to," I advised him, "drop a stick of dynamite down there—just as long as it doesn't knock the house off its foundation."



Marty Blake

That's not exactly a scholarly approach to research and discovery, but with no cosmic powers to turn rock into water, I was left with the transubstantial blues, knowing I was at the mercy of circumstances beyond my control. If anything, though, I was encouraged to explore and learn more about the hydrogeology of my little piece of turf. Truth be told, it's not the first time I've wanted to swap my editorial skills for something more captivating—or at least more pragmatic at the moment. When I get skunked fishing, for instance, I contemplate how my fortunes would fare if I were an entomologist or an ichthyologist. When I hear a smokin' guitar riff, I may drift off in my mind to the Mississippi Delta and envision myself as an ethnomusicologist journeying around in search of authentic bluesmen.

Such are a few of my paths not taken. One beauty of this job, however, is I can live vicariously through the stories of others. In this issue devoted to research, I'm sure you'll be amazed when you read about some of the work being done here on the Hill. For example, just hammering out these words at the keyboard can be therapeutic, according to psychology professor Joshua Smyth, who studies the health benefits of expressive writing. Over in the Physics Building, Professor Gianfranco Vidali is attempting to simulate how stars are born. In the Center for Science and Technology, information studies professor Elizabeth Liddy G'77, G'88 is devising ways to smarten up computers so they can mine databases with a human-like understanding of language. While the research alone is impressive, what's also worth noting is how passionate these folks are about their work. Talk about devotion—some focus on a specific expertise for much of their career. Others engage in cross-disciplinary activities, bending and expanding previously unexplored boundaries of research.

No doubt, research requires an insatiable curiosity, whether you're scouring the dictionary for a new word or wrestling with quantum electrodynamics. So it's important to keep wondering, asking, and learning. Research advances our civilization, and it'd be one dull world if we all still sat around and banged on rocks—except for the mineralogists, geologists, geophysicists, and hydrogeologists. They need to do this as part of their research. And while my thirst for deep well water has been quenched, I hope my thirst for knowledge grows deeper every day.

JAY COX
Editor

Published by SURFACE, 2002