

'The Silence of the Printed Word'

By Mel Lavine

Special to the Times

In last week's column I referred to FDR's famous quote, "the only thing we have to fear is fear itself." In looking for a source for the assertion I gave short shrift to the 19th century Scottish writer, Thomas Carlyle. The way it came out in print Carlyle was repeating the words of Henry David Thoreau, his American contemporary.

Even in the brave new digital age things get screwed up. Thoreau said: "Nothing is so much to be feared than fear." Ditto Carlyle, according to my rendering. Actually Carlyle had put it differently: "The first duty for a man is still that of subduing fear. We cannot see till then." So let the record be corrected.

It may seem like a small thing but words are important, maybe more important than we imagine in our rapidly-changing age. And that brings me to a discovery I want to pass on.

In last Sunday's New York Times, Verlyn Klinkenborg, tells us about a recent drive he took with a friend from his farm in New York to Southern California. They took along an e-book, "Moby-Dick," read aloud by William Hootkins. As the tale moves on, Klinkenborg "began to feel as though we were carrying a garrulous hitchhiker, a transcendental encyclopedist, indeed a back-seat whaler of sorts." This, of course, is Ishmael, the character who narrates the pursuit of Moby-Dick, the great white whale, by the monomaniacal Captain Ahab and his crew aboard the Pequod. Ishmael is the lone survivor.

What struck me in Klinkenborg's piece was how he contrasted hearing the words on the e-book from reading them on the printed page:

"I was always glad at day's end...when we parked and turned off 'Moby-Dick.' Not that the book ended then. Usually, in the evening, I would begin reading the book where we had left off listening. I have never been so struck by the silence of the printed word. I have never grasped so clearly how inward words have to go in our minds before they come alive."

Moby-Dick's author, Herman Melville, was all but forgotten when he died in 1891. Since it was

re-discovered in the last century, critics, have said "Moby-Dick" is the Great American Novel.

* * *

New hope from Monday's San Francisco Chronicle about climate change: "Not all scientists are so gloomy. Ashley Ballantyne, a bioclimatologist at the University of Montana who studies paleoclimate records, said the climate has always changed, with ice ages, warnings and mass extinctions."

Mel Lavine was a television producer for many years with NBC News and CBS News in New York. Contact him at his e-mail address: mellavine@aol.com.