

# Adjacent opportunities (7.2)

## A culture of emergence

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Interactive agents intermixed in cultural creation are a complex brew, a bizarre blending of eccentric, divergent and vital elements that combine and recombine creating the gravitational pull that shape and form the communities in which we live. There are few better examples of the cultural caldrons out of which these emergent properties pour than a real bookstore – a *real bookstore* – not one of those corporate palaces of popular mediocrity. We're talking a *real* bookstore that perpetrates something akin to an alchemical effect on the community within which it resides. And one such wizard's den – one of the best bookstores in all of southern California – is a small little shop tucked into a corner of La Jolla, CA called simply, 'D.G. Wills Books', under the proprietorship of no less a personage than D.G. "Dennis" Wills himself.

This isn't your safe and sane Borders or B & N. It resembles a cross between City Lights Books in San Francisco, Blackwells in Oxford, and a rafter filled antiquarian with an overarching sports theme. But don't let the accoutrements of surfboards; old LA Rams helmets and a multiplying nest of Maltisse falcons fool you. This is a shrine – a pantheon of intelligent thought. There's no question that it's Dennis's place and it arose out of a cultural adjacent opportunity, a seam in the landscape, that emerged when La Jolla became home to the UC San Diego campus and Jonas Salk moved his operations west from Pittsburgh.

When these two scholarly tectonic plates met, this earthquake prone landscape made a radical dynamic shift from the lily-white Anglo-Saxon, Protestant-only ordinances that were designed to protect La Jolla from things Jewish, to a community of intellectual challenges foisted on it by people like the arrival of Jonas Salk, Jacob Bronwinski, and Nobel Laureate, Gerald Edelman. Once the intelligencia were ensconced, the upheaval they unleashed created just the right amount of space for D.G. Wills Books. The Jewel by the Sea was never the same, but its luster shone even greater.

Wills's road to La Jolla was far from direct. The idea of running a bookstore surfaced while in the Air Force, working at a top secret, cryptographic National Security Agency (NSA) site in Germany. As he describes it, "We were monitoring activities of the Soviet military in Czechoslovakia and East Germany and participating in brinkmanship in preparation for World War III, and I thought, why haven't we evolved any further as a species? Why are we still capable of waging war and toying with nuclear destruction? I was plagued with the problem of war, and thought that maybe someday I'd study arms control or start a bookstore so I would have the time to think about the problem of war."

When he unplugged his listening devices and got out of the service, Wills headed for Columbia University, enrolling in the Russian Institute and indeed studied arms control. But when he didn't get the slot he wanted in the basement of the White House, he came west and opened that bookstore. He'd picked La Jolla because of the university and a not so obvious missing catalytic ingredient – an academic bookstore.

He wanted to create the kind of bookstore he remembered while studying philosophy at Oxford

the Blackwells', and Thortons on Broad Street. "I brought my memory of those old fashioned academic bookstores with me, and that's why we carry Cicero, Plato, Herodotus and Zenoah, instead of what's on the NY Times bestseller list. We tend to prefer books that have stood the test of time." He says with a wry smile beneath pictures of the denizen of authors who have addressed audiences large and small from behind his counter through the years. From the Beats Ferlinghetti, Ginsburg, Rothenberg, *et al.*, to Tammy Horne, the Beekeeper lady, to Norman Mailer. A brethren of literary strange attractors would describe them politely. But what this odd collective has generated out of this wood-sided warehouse of wisdom has filtered out over the community and helped reshape what would otherwise be nothing more than a San Diegan version of Beverly Hills' Rodeo Rd. People are drawn to Dennis's place in droves, whether to hear Christopher Hitchens perform his apology for George Bush or to revel in the raucous Raider Nation, or to delight in the delicacy of Japanese dolls. They get something here that informs their lives in no other way available, and out of that interaction emerges a culture that wasn't there before.

You won't find Harry Potter on Wills's shelves, unless of course it's in Latin or some obscure East Indian dialect. Some people cross the threshold and are immediately disappointed that they can't find the *Da Vinci Code*. When he explains that they could find Cicero in Latin, they ask, "Who'd buy that?" Fortunately, for Wills, the community that loves him does, and there are enough of them to keep him infecting the community with his viral literary interactions for as long as he wants. As he tells it, "Well-known scientists are always bringing in their friends from out of town to show them our philosophy wall and saying, 'See, we have culture in La Jolla'."

What Wills has also created with his combination of literature and sports is a bit of a clubhouse atmosphere. Being a small business owner, his hours are long so his friends come to him. There are the annual events like the Super Bowl Sunday bash, with TV set strewn throughout the bookshelves, where invariably some unsuspecting academic will wonder in and be told to go away because the game is on, and they will reply in disgust, "Well, of all the... I thought a bookstore would be one place I could

escape the Super B owl.” And they would then be ushered out on a rail of expletives. Of course, they were forewarned the sign posted prominently on the door counseled them not to enter. Ah, culture.

But it’s on Wednesday’s that the culture spills onto the sidewalk in front of D.G. Wills Books for what is lovingly referred to as “therapy.” Long about Three PMish, the bottles of red wine are uncorked, glasses appropriately filled and refilled, and the conversations and pulchritudinous observations begin. The conversations range from politics, to sports, to beautiful women, to philosophy and continue until all the bottles are empty. They come from the Ferrari/Maserati dealership on the corner, from the coffee shop next door, from the local podiatrists, from school down the street, from surfing at Black’s. They show up because something absolutely different from their normal day emerges out of those therapeutic interactions – a sense of culture and community that is healing, and all fostered by the simple action of selling books. It’s the kind of activities from which legends emerge. But as Wills pragmatically puts it, “We won’t last forever – I mean, it will be someone else’s problem when I drop dead.”

In the meantime, this hallowed enclave inspires and informs a community of world-class scientists, academics and sports fans who can find a place to browse and contemplate the larger questions, uncovering a book or dusting off an idea that just might spark the next adjacent opportunity that could truly change the world.