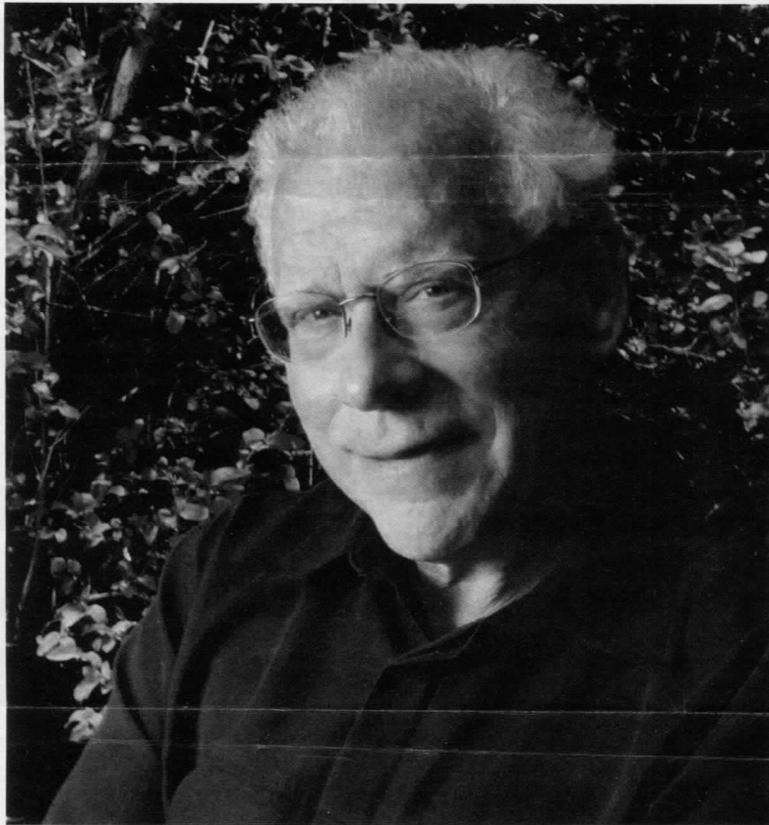


Techno-philosopher

Story by Judy Steininger · Photography by John Roberts



Richard Thieme's clients include big business and federal government agencies.

Richard Thieme is a mostly digital man in a transforming analog world. He's delighted to be on both the actual as well as virtual international stages discussing how the average desktop computer may change humanity.

Thieme has more than a little of the rock star in him considering at international conferences he has served as the bookend for people like Steve Ballmer, CEO of Microsoft. On a smaller scale, drinking coffee at an outside café on Silver Spring Drive he is acknowledged by no less than a half dozen people because of a series of lectures he gave at their synagogue.

His white, wire-haired, bespectacled head attests to the years he spent as an Episcopalian priest and his casual T-shirt, Bermuda shorts attire places him squarely in the company of the anti-haberdashery crowd of software programmers.

"I was a priest for 16 years and never repeated a sermon twice," he says. "The ministry is the perfect training ground to become more human. I must have needed a lot of that. As a minister you are compelled to live people's lives in the present — what do they need today. In the ministry you relate those daily experiences to archetypal truths."

From their home in Fox Point, helping him attend his flocks both past and present, is his wife of 20 years, Shirley. Their marriage was a merger of sorts: "She had four kids and I had three. Now that all the kids are grown, she has an important job with Advanced Healthcare." In the movie "The Matrix" streams of data scroll by in fluorescent

glory, dazzling and befuddling both characters and audience. Thieme a little like that data — at once dazzling and befuddling — he enjoys the effect. Thieme works, the company he runs from his house, is how he reaches the global community in cyberspace. His mind works in bursts of information and he leaps from esoteric topic to esoteric topic. After swerving through conversations on quantum hacking, String Theory as metaphor, and what is plagiarism on the computer, it takes a team of horses to slow him down and demand: "Just what is it you do or are in five sentences or less?" To which Thieme replies: "I'm a techno-philosopher." That certainly clears things up, doesn't it?

With a bachelor of arts degree from Northwestern University and a master's degree from the University of Chicago he taught literature in the 1970s, served as a priest during the '80s until he had a falling out with a bishop on the East Coast, and began to see the transformative power of the computer in the '90s. He learned from "15-year-old mentors because this stuff hasn't been around long enough to have an academic discipline. It is being made up as we go along.

"What I do for companies and governmental agencies is interpret changes caused by technology. I interpret for people who see a pie but not the big picture. I edit life for people who don't have the time. When urged to be a little more specific, Thieme explains, "I deal with the human implications of technology." OK, we can grapple with that.

By prowling the Internet and attending conferences, Thieme began to understand the borderless territory of cyberspace. To Thieme, what is not being considered in this brave new world was the human being.

What keeps him awake in the wee hours of the night are questions like the one posed by the sci-fi writer William Gibson in his short story "Idoru." "In a world in which the patterns of our behavior are updated daily in a massive database, what does it mean to be free."

"My work in the last ten years has been an obvious extension of my literary studies and my years as a priest," he says. "When I consult with a company, first I just listen, then I do research, then I just hang out with people. Finally I integrate and articulate the areas of difficulty."

He established his expertise and reputation by writing articles for periodicals and zines. Many of them have been translated into German, Chinese, Japanese, Slovene, Hebrew, Danish and Indonesian, taught at universities throughout the world and frequently anthologized. In June 2004, they were collected in a book, "Islands in the Clickstream," published by Syngress. Just catch these intriguing chapter headings: "Hacking as Practice for Trans-Planetary Life in the 21st Century," "Toads in an Imaginary Garden," "The Stock Market, UFOs and Religious Experience" and "Computer Applications for Spirituality."

Much of his time Thieme spends working with an impressive list of companies like GE Medical, Medtronic, Microsoft Israel, Alliant Energy and Allstate Insurance. He has spoken eight times for both the Black Hat Briefings and Def Con. Other security conferences include ToorCon, PumpCon, Rubicon and Hivercon. Major media outlets comment on him. CNN says he is a member of the "cyber avant-garde," the London Sunday Telegraph calls him a father figure for online culture. Le Monde in Paris says he is "a keen observer of hacker attitudes and behaviors."

Could Thieme enlighten us about hackers? "You have to distinguish between hackers and crackers. Hackers started in the '60s to explore the limits of this new technology. Crackers are the criminal element who want to do more than explore."

As Thieme winds down — he's preparing for presentations at the Pentagon and Los Alamos National Laboratories in the next two weeks — he tosses out the comment, "I guess you could say I can straddle two worlds." No kidding! The son of one Jewish parent, the other Christian; the literature professor who became an Episcopalian priest who now explores the spirituality of the computer, is wired differently than the rest of us. Fearless and good-natured as he is, one can only hope that should a time machine be developed that he'll be the person to get the first ride. ■