

The slow life in an online dead zone

By Roland Merullo

FVEN WITH its recent troubles, I'm a big fan of the free market. Having lived in a communist dictatorship (the former USSR) for two and a half years, and having had, for one of those years, the unenviable job of supervising laborers and security guards in an environment almost completely lacking in financial incentive, I am grateful that capitalism came to exist on this earth.

At the same time, when I hear candidates talking as if the free market should be worshipped as a god, I feel the need to raise an objection.

Let us take, for one important example, the availability of high-speed Internet. Even in the sophisticated state of Massachusetts, there are pockets where citizens must still use dial-up. Hard to believe, but true. I know it's true because I live in one of those pockets. On certain evenings I can be found with my eighth-grade daughter sitting in the car outside the closed ballet studio, five miles from our house. She uses their Internet signal to do online homework.

Just this morning, someone sent me a photograph via e-mail. Forty minutes after I first checked my messages, the photo finished downloading. I cannot check my bank balance or watch a video online. Neighbors who've tried satellite Internet complain that it is expensive, slow, and unreliable, at least in these hilly parts. So we are mired in a provincial backwater, waiting for the free market — or brave local citizen initiatives like Wired-West — to save us.

Ironically enough, the other day I received an e-mail from old friends in Siberia... who have high-speed Internet. Two years ago on vacation, checking into a hotel in the remote Italian Alps we asked, "Do you have Wi-Fi?" We were met with a

semi-offended, "Certo!" Of course!

But here in Massachusetts, no sale. The story in our town — large area, small population — is that one of the huge corporations that provides Internet and other media services went to our local officials and said, "We can provide service to 150 homes in the northern section of your town, or to 100 homes in the southern section. Which would you like?" The 150, of course, they replied. An answer seen by some as wise and diplomatic, and by those of us in the southern section as spineless.

But it's unfair to ask a few small-town officials to be tough negotiators with a giant corporation. And it's foolish to think, in this example, that the free market will take care of us. Businesses exist not to serve people and not to create jobs — those are beneficial side effects — but to make a profit. Fair enough. I hope my own small business makes a nice profit this year. I hope every business does. But the profit motive is not a moral force. The unregulated free market has no more conscience than a balance sheet. That must be imposed by government, by our collective sense of decency, for the benefit of everyone — rich and poor, lazy and energetic, healthy and ill, young and old, rural and urban.



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The black-and-white election rhetoric sounds a particularly sour note in my ear, not just because of the Internet issue, but because I've lived in a society of extremes. Our government is not always inefficient, and it is not evil. The free market is not always efficient, and it is not evil either.

What's evil, or, at least, what has the potential to lead us further into societal and financial turmoil, is the kind of simplistic all-or-nothing talk that has created the present paralysis. What we argue about

we should give the steed of the market free rein, and where we need a jockey.

In the early part of the previous century, the federal government insisted that utility companies provide phone service to everyone, whether it was profitable or not, whether there were 1,000 homes clustered in two square miles, or 10 homes spread out in the countryside. The free market did not do that.

Roland Merullo's most recent novel, "The Talk-Funny Girl," is a finalist for the New England Book Award.