

Lake effect: Not spiritually landlocked

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [December 28, 2004](#) issue

This has not been a good year for *Luftmenschen*. Before bidding the year good-bye, let's pay them some attention. The term, the dictionary tells us, is "an adaptation of the Yiddish 'luftmensch,' which breaks down into 'luft' (A Germanic root that can be tied linguistically to the English words 'loft' and 'lofty'), meaning 'air,' plus 'mensch,' meaning 'human being.'" The pioneer Jewish-American novelist Israel Zangwill imported it in 1907, when he described someone who was "not an earth-man. . . . He was an air-man, floating on facile wings."

The *Luftmensch* has floated in and out of my mind since 1962, when I first read "Life in Chicago," an essay by the major critic Isaac Rosenfeld, who died in 1956, age 38. Saul Bellow wrote of him, "He had a bent for theology, . . . which he did everything possible to discourage. . . . He was a playful man."

Rosenfeld liked to write about cities, and he loved water. But he was born inland in Chicago and had to discover the lakefront for himself. He is especially lyrical about "the long narrow strip of Lake culture," the museums, commerce centers and universities now so celebrated by tourists. "The water culture as opposed to the land means internationalism, an openness to interchange, a hospitality to ideas," Rosenfeld writes. His descriptions of the city and especially of Hyde Park and the University of Chicago in his posthumously published *An Age of Enormity* (1962) are the most discerning and delicious I've read.

When he wrote in 1957, the big task at hand was "defending, preserving and extending the precious crust of culture along the Lake," and of discovering the "'principle of all great cities': As I see it, this principle is very simple (but then, I am a *luftmensch*, with a thirst for water)."

I thought of Rosenfeld when I read that in 2004, outside the South, all the states that bordered on great oceans or the Great Lakes voted Democratic (except Ohio, dragged down from the water by voters in its landlocked south). I think the water-

culture voters were disposed toward an international, cosmopolitan and “open” approach. They are *luftmenschen*, albeit more practical ones than Rosenfeld’s type. And they lost out to earthbound, landlocked and fearful sorts.

I remain a Nebraskan, compromised now by having lived half a century and more near a Great Lake, where *Luftmenschen* pursue their Protestant-Catholic-Jewish-Muslim-secular ways. They’ve gone down to defeat, scorned by people who seem to think they themselves have a monopoly on “values and morals.”

To be “open to interchange” and “hospitable to ideas” means trying to connect the spiritually landlocked and their vision with that of the *luftmenschen*. As Rosenfeld says, *Luftmenschen* find “the everlasting in the ephemeral,” in “sound, voice, gesture, and graceful leaping, for it is of such things that the ultimate realities, of the mind and heart, are made.”

For 48 years I have depended on a sequence of copy editors who have translated my columns, reviews and articles into prose that readers tell me they find intelligible. Sometimes new and, especially, young writers are offended when editors scribble over their manuscripts. But veteran writers *welcome* such crafting and clarifying. In that sequence of editors I have welcomed the work of Trudy Bush, who has commuted several times a week from her home in Lake Geneva, Wisconsin, to attend to manuscripts like mine. With a zillion train miles behind her, she is ending her commute. I’ll miss her. So long, dear Trudy, God go with you.