

Plugged in...And Tuned Out

Rev. Scott W. Alexander
Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Vero Beach
Sunday, October 17, 2010

Early this summer, before I moved from the DC area to Vero, I was profoundly saddened when I read a small article (just a squib, really) which appeared in local news section of The Washington Post. It seems that one bright, sunny June afternoon, a young man (in his early 20's) was killed by a freight train in suburban Maryland...struck as he walked on the tracks. The article reported that the young man (who was wearing headphones and was plugged into his I-phone at the time) apparently did not hear the train barreling down the tracks toward him...absorbed in music (or whatever) he even failed to hear the warning blasts of the train's loud horn which the engineer repeatedly sent his way to warn him of the impending disaster. This unfortunate young man was plugged in to the amazing technology of his I-phone...and yet was tragically tuned out from the world immediately around him...and that mundane decision cost him his life.

This morning, I want to talk with you about a revolution – a true, radical, life-transforming revolution -- that has (over the past two decades or so) swept through our culture -- and (whether we have been ready for it or not) our individual lives as well. As I am sure everyone of you is thoroughly aware, we have all witnessed (and to one degree or another, all been caught up in) a communication/information/technological revolution that has systematically changed the rhythms and realities of our daily lives...most particularly the ways in which we:

- 1) gather and process information about our world and
- 2) communicate with one another as human beings.

With astounding cultural speed really, a wide variety of electronic data devices, communication modalities, and social networking platforms have become available to us, and have literally transformed the way we interact with our world and one another.

Let me try (as best and briefly as I can...so that we are all on the same page) to describe the scope of the communication and information revolution that is having such an impact on our lives. While this revolution has been building for decades -- beginning with the introduction of personal computers, and cell phones...and proceeding quickly to numerous enhanced data devices like the blackberry, I-Phones and I-pads and all the rest...and the subsequent explosion of information on the worldwide web -- it is really in the last 5 years -- since the introduction of numerous WEB 2.0 applications that this revolution has picked up incredible steam.

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Wikipedia (the evolving, participatory, on-line encyclopedia which is itself a web 2.0 interactive instrument) says, “Web 2.0 refers to...a second generation of web development and web design. It is characterized as facilitating communication, information sharing, inter-operability, user-centered design and collaboration on the World Wide Web. It has led to the development of web-based communities, hosted services, and web applications. Examples include social-networking sites [like MySpace, Facebook and Twitter], video-sharing sites, wikis, blogs, mashups, [and other intractive modalities]” So...with on-line instruments like Facebook, MySpace, Twitter, You-Tube, Blogger, Skype, and all the other nearly countless interfacing applications that are now available to us at the click of a mouse (or a touch on a screen) we now face a veritable explosion of ways to increasingly interact with other human beings and the world at large.

Now...and please hear me eagerly affirm this loud and clearly...even though (as a 61 year old man who grew up in “the dark ages” of pre-computer and pre-web America) aspects of this information revolution intimidate me, I am NOT a Luddite or naysayer when it comes to these incredible new technologies. This information revolution clearly creates incredible (and positive!) possibilities for expanded human knowledge and interaction, and thus must be, on the most basic level, welcomed and embraced, by humanity in general. But it is ALSO clear to me (and this is surely of EQUAL IMPORTANCE FOR US TO PAY ATTENTION TO) that these new technologies and devices present us with unavoidable challenges (and in some cases dangerous pitfalls) in terms of how we – both as individuals and as communities – use these amazing tools.

What is clear to me is that, in the days and years ahead, we must SET UP PROPER BOUNDARIES and MAKE HEALTHY CHOICES so that we are not overwhelmed – literally – by all the possibilities and demands these modalities and platforms place on our limited human attentions...and our rather primitive neurological wiring (and more on that key point in a moment!). I passionately believe that if we do not make wise choices (about how we use...and of equal importance do NOT use) all this new digital stuff, we can (at a fundamental human level) BECOME DISTRACTED...DANGEROUSLY DISTRACTED...from the holy, essential life that is at our fingertips.

How can I best state this potential problem we all face? I have believed for some time that the greatest spiritual danger in American life today is simply DISTRACTION...daily distraction from everyday life that sings around us, and alone has the power to bless us and make us whole. You and I live in a

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DISTRACTED and a DISTRACTING culture...that moves faster and faster and faster, and seduces most of us into attempting to take in more and more information and stimuli and interaction, without (and here is the key part of this) without any conscious discernment or decision-making on our parts.

I am of the opinion that most of us in America today are living with a bad case of INFORMATION AND INTERACTION OVERLOAD...most of us are now habitually plugged in to so many devices and relationships and streams of information that our attention spans are in a constant state of overload...we are chronically overwhelmed with data and communication! Let me put this point in the form of a question...is there anyone in this room right now who really feels they need a higher volume of daily information than they are already regularly taking in???

In his important new book *Hamlet's Blackberry: A Practical Philosophy for Building a Good Life in the Digital Age*, media and technology writer William Powers suggests that far too many Americans have fallen victim (in the midst of this technological revolution) to something he calls OBSESSIVE CONNECTIVITY.

Powers points out that we human beings -- who still carry the neurological wiring from our early, primitive days on earth, we have not advanced much in terms of our cognitive and neurological abilities...we human beings (remember it wasn't all that long ago that we jumped out of the trees on the Savannas of Africa) we human beings:

are wired by nature to pay attention to new stimuli, thereby helping us to respond quickly to predators or to nab a potential meals. The biochemical effect of the iPhone ping [for example] might be injecting [our brains] with what one scientist calls a "dopamine squirt." In other words, [Powers goes on] marketers have told us we must be connected all the time, and our brains [wired to respond to stimuli like Pavlov's dogs!] have done the rest. [Powers] worries that our homes, the traditional shelter from the crowd, have been invaded to the point where we may be in danger of no longer connecting deeply with our families, our books, and our [own] thoughts. [From the review in the Sunday New York Times book review by Laurie Winer 8/18/10]

"Without even realizing it, we've signed up for a life in which we are connected, all the time" and thereby find ourselves mired in distracting "information overload." [William Powers]

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I share Powers' fear that we may be (as he puts it elsewhere) "teetering on the edge of a brand-new technological cliff" that, if we do not have the wisdom to step back from, may irreparably harm the quality of our daily lives.

There have been a number of recent articles (in the New York Times and elsewhere) which describe young American families so addicted to their Blackberries, iPhones (and the related Facebook, Twitter, texting and e-mail accounts) that while they manage to sit at the dinner table together each evening, are each INDIVIDUALLY so absorbed in "the doings and stimulation" of their individual little glowing screens that they barely are aware of...or interact with...one another (as we saw acted out in this riotous morning's "Time for all Ages" skit).

Similarly, psychologists have recently identified a new 21st Century illness, namely INTERNET ADDICTION DISORDER -- the modern affliction that has gripped millions of people like us who find themselves unable to control the amount of time and energy they spend "on-line" in front of a computer. Just like an addiction to alcohol, food, sex or drugs, internet addiction can take over a significant portion of the lives of its victims...and throw their lives (AND THEIR PRIMARY RELATIONSHIPS!) seriously out of health and balance. Those who become "hooked on the web" can find themselves neglecting other crucial and necessary parts of their lives (like work or family or sleep life) as they insatiably feed their obsessive hunger for the stimulation and validation they increasingly only find "on-line."

For example...Facebook -- the interactive/social website that has become so wildly popular (with suddenly 500 million persons around the world...soon to be one billion the experts predict!...and most particularly with Americans under 30) Facebook already has become addictive to hundreds of thousands of its users. "Facebook junkies" find themselves involuntarily spending hours a day compulsively logged into their accounts -- updating their profiles, seeking an ever-wider circle of friends and fans -- and thus (unintentionally for sure) neglecting the work, family and friends, and other healthy and joyful components of daily life that really have the power to make their lives whole, rich, and satisfying.

And beyond the problems of COMPULSIVE CONNECTIVITY and ADDICTION, there is the problem (so many of us fall victim to) of trying to MULTI-TASK with these new digital devices and technologies. Now I know that "multi-tasking" is all the rage these days (and we've all heard that all successful and clever people are supposed to be good at it, most certainly ourselves) but the

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facts about our human capabilities (and limited attention spans) suggest otherwise. The truth is that leading evolutionary psychologists and neurologists remind us that as sophisticated and complex as our human brains may be -- again...in terms of how much information, data, and stimulation we can successfully take in and process at any one time -- neurologically speaking we really just jumped out of the trees on the African plains! Our brains are rather primitive computers that can get overloaded in a nanosecond, especially when we try to do more than one thing at once, and don't do any "filtering" or "regulation" or "decision making" about all the stimuli that are seeking to pour into our little microchips up here.

Simply put, no matter how smart or clever any one of us might be (and who here doesn't like to think of themselves as above average in this regard!) no matter how smart or clever any one of us might be...the truth is WE MAMMALS ARE NOT REALLY WIRED FOR SUCCESSFUL MULTI-TASKING. Recent studies about human productivity have proven that people who attempt to multi-task are less productive and creative than those who focus on one task at a time. We human animals (and don't imagine yourself as something more, dear friends) we human animals are simply not wired for simultaneously taking in multitudinous streams of information, relationships and stimulation...and those who tells you they are, are overstating their natural capacities.

As William Powers observes, "If we are constantly toggling between people on Facebook and texts and [tweets and Skype] and all [the other new] ways of connecting all day long, and we never have a sustained connection, it is not real connectedness...[in fact] it's sort of the opposite of connectedness"... [it is distraction].

Let me be the first to confess to this truth. The other day -- despite my knowing better (and constantly warning others about the diminishing returns of multi-tasking and being compulsively plugged in to electronic devices all the time) -- I was sitting at my desk at the Fellowship attempting to do just that. Without really making a conscious decision to do so, I was -- in the self-same-moment -- 1) talking to someone on one phone, 2) finger pecking out an e-mail to someone else, 3) while trying to pick up the gist of a conversation happening just outside my office! Suddenly I realized that rather than accomplishing 3 things well at one, I was inadequately doing all three in a distracted manner. Sound familiar?

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All I am saying this morning is that -- because the communication and information revolution is here to stay -- the question is NOT whether we can return to a simpler, slower paced time...we cannot (even if you refuse to sign up for Facebook or Twitter). But what we can do (in this new technological age which is braking over us) is MANAGE (and that is the key word for the morning, MANAGE!) how we want to utilize (and control) all these new instruments. I passionately believe that the decisions we make (again...about the intentional management of both communication, information, and relationships in our daily lives) will have a great deal to say about the future health and happiness of our lives. For our own human well-being (for our sanity even!), we need to make REAL AND CLEAR AND SOMETIMES HARD CHOICES about what we do (and do not!!!) pay attention to on a regular basis. My point here is that if we (as busy Americans) are to lead daily lives of health, focus, calm, wholeness, and joy...we must decide (on a proactive basis of deciding what is truly important) what we will focus on...and (of complimentary importance) what we will simply let pass us by.

Let me speak personally for a moment. As all these new technologies and platforms beg for me to spend hours a day tethered to them, something deep in my spirit -- something deep in my soul -- is begging me to set boundaries around the rich fundamentals of the good life that is already mine...which include (but are not limited to) daily meditative exercise (swimming and biking)...quiet time with my spouse...unrushed dinners with dear old friends...leisurely walks through Riverside Park at sunset...reading time (including with my beloved newspapers with a fresh cup of sacred coffee each morning!) ...and unrushed phone conversations with loved ones around the country -- to name just a few of the uncomplicated, holy rhythms of my life which I cherish and want to protect.

Look...as an engaged "people professional" with a wide circle of relationships and interests, I know that I am going to have to utilize and engage many of these new interactive communication and information technologies -- how could I, for example, not regularly turn to the worldwide web as I prepare my sermons...and how could I lead a congregation without regularly checking my e-mail and cell phone? But that said, what I do hope (what I pray!) is that in the midst of my busy and sophisticated life, I will have the spiritual wisdom to limit, channel, and manage these technologies and modalities in ways that do not crowd out (or distract me from) what is truly satisfying and important in my life...and know when to Un-plug myself from all this activity so that I can bask in the true fundamentals of my life.

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And the same is true for each and every one of you, dear friends. This amazing and fleeting life we have been given is a great and mysterious gift...a great and mysterious gift which we must purposefully and intentionally manage (in countless ways across the daily landscapes of our lives) if we are to maximize the miracle of what it means to be fully human. We each have the awesome and unavoidable responsibility to be THE GATEKEEPERS OF OUR OWN PSYCHES AND SOULS...TO MAKE WISE CHOICES... TO ESTABLISH AND MAINTAIN HEALTHY BOUNDARIES...so that our lives can be works of focus, calm, wholeness and joy.

Just because the world wants to throw an ever expanding cacophony of communication and information at you doesn't mean you have to let it all in! So I pray you, dear friends, be reflective and smart about the rhythm and pace and flow YOU ALLOW IN YOUR LIVES. Choose to impose a healthy order and flow to your daily journey...say "NO" to all that ENDLESS INFORMATION seeks to mindlessly distract you from your essential self (and this stunningly beautiful world)...for only then...ONLY THEN...will you now the blessing of what it truly means to be fully, joyfully human.

Amen.

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