

Technology and Human Relationships

From the first time a stick was used as a club, to fire to the wheel to the internet, we have used technology to make our lives easier, and we have done it for a long, long time. In fact it is so interwoven with our identity that some people have said that the use of tools is the defining characteristic of human beings. It is what makes us special in the world. Well it did make us special until we discovered that other primates and even some dolphin communities have used very basic tools.

Technology is everywhere and it is everything that we use. That is obvious in today's lifestyle, but even for very basic living we depend on engineering the world around us and making tools, even rudimentary ones. Technology is the construction of our homes, no matter how simple. It is the ability to find, prepare and preserve food. It is as simple as collecting water to drink.

Unfortunately that rudimentary technology that was first used to hunt animals to eat, was also quickly used to combat other human, or I suppose pre-human communities. Just as much as we depend on technology to survive in a harsh world, so do we use it against one another in horrifying ways. From the weapon to the construction of homes, the use of technology is a complicated human experience with a tremendous capacity to bring people together, or turn them against one another.

What fascinates me is the obsession that some have with judging technology, as if it were possible to lump it all together. Many, many people have invested countless hours in proving technology as the downfall of humanity or the salvation of the world. Literally, they claim those sorts of extremes. From casual coffee conversation to the highest levels of academia, everyone has an opinion about "the good old days" or technology's ability to solve all that ails us.

It seems to me that some technologies bring people together, and some isolate us. Some are life affirming, and the others are death dealing. Nuclear

weapons, Wheel chairs, chemical pollutants that choke the globe, the ability to feed and clothe and house people, land mines, medical advancements from stitches to genetic engineering. While it may sell books or get people riled up, no one with any sense about them can rightfully claim that technology is all good or all bad. It simply is; it is a part of what we do as humans. What matters is how we choose to use it.

I want to offer you two stories of caution, two stories about the way technology impacted the lives of people who misunderstood it. The first story you have probably heard about. It is the story of a young man name Chris McCandless. He was a promising young man from an upper class family with a degree from a prestigious University. However Chris was never content with the lifestyle that his parents' success afforded or even the lifestyle that his own accomplishments promised. Like so many young men, Chris was restless for adventure, for the opportunity to make his mark on the world, to prove his manhood, his independence. In his efforts to prove himself Chris took off with little warning, to travel the western United States in his old beat up Datsun. Eventually he abandoned his car to continue his adventure hitchhiking, on foot, even by kayak. It was an amazing adventure. Along the way Chris met many different people, but most importantly, he remained independent. He was his own man, free from social commitments or material possessions to tie him down.

As the year of adventure wore on, Chris became more and more committed to the adventure. Strangely as he became more sure of himself, he became more desperate to prove his independence. Then it came to him. Chris would conquer the frontier, alone. In April 1992 he hitchhiked to Alaska and walked alone into the wilderness north of Mt McKinley. He had given \$25,000 in savings to charity, abandoned most of his possessions, burned all the cash in his wallet. Chris journeyed into some of the hashed wilderness in the United States alone, with only the pack on his back and some very rudimentary tools. He would prove his independence, the adventure of a lifetime. Four months later, Chris McCandless' dead body was found by a hunting expedition.

This heart wrenching true story was told in the book, by Jon Krakauer, "Into the Wild" and later the film by the same name. Of course this is a dramatic story. But I bring it to you today to make a point. Chris's solo adventure into the Alaska wilderness appears bizarre at first glance, even selfish. But it was not all that dissimilar to the way many people reject using technology.

We hear it often as reminiscent of "the good old days." Some people are simply technology averse, even to a religious degree. But to what end do these well-intentioned people avoid technology? Proving our independence can be an exciting and powerful adventure. However we must remember that independence is just a stone's through from isolation. And rejecting technology simply for the sake of rejecting it isn't liberating. It is punishing.

The second story of caution I have to share with you is fictional and a little more whimsical. However I think it may have even more bearing on many of our lives in modern America. This story comes out of a fun little book that some of us read together, "The Alchemist," by Paulo Coehlo.

The hero of the book, a simple Spanish shepherd boy, was on a journey to follow his personal legend, to see the pyramids in Egypt. Of course a significant part of that journey is the trip across the Sahara. It is impossible to make that trip alone so the boy found a caravan to travel with.

Another traveler in the caravan was an Englishman. As is typically the case when a character is known simply as "the Englishman", he was a very serious person engaged in intellectual pursuit. This Englishman was studying the ancient art of alchemy, the process of turning metal into gold, and the pursuit of all sorts of secrets. The Englishman was on his journey to find a true alchemist, one who could teach him the ancient art of the tradition. He was on a journey but until he found the alchemist who could teach him, he would stick to his books. For he was convinced

that the secrets of the world were contained in the pages of his books, if only he could decipher them.

Meanwhile, the boy, the hero, spent his days reflecting on the desert, the sounds of the animals, the patterns of the sand, and the silence that seemed to consume their days. The two adventures became quick friends in the midst of the large caravan, and one day the Englishman told his young companion about the ancient art of alchemy and the secrets contained in his book. The Englishman knew that the boy should stop staring out into the desert and read more. The secret of the world was not in the sand, but on the pages of books.

“Then one day the boy returned the books to the Englishman. ‘Did you learn anything?’ the Englishman asked, eager to hear what it might be. He needed someone to talk to so as to avoid thinking about the [very long and dangerous journey].

“I learned that the world has a soul, and that whoever understands that soul can also understand the language of things. I learned that many alchemists realized their Personal Legends, and wind up discovering the Soul of the World... But above all, I learned that these things are all so simple that they could be written on the surface of an emerald.”

“The Englishman was disappointed. The years of research, the magic symbols, the strange words and the laboratory equipment... none of this had made an impression on the boy. His soul must be too primitive to understand those things, he thought.

“He took back his books and packed them away again in their bags. The boy went back to contemplating the silence of the desert.” (p.83-84)

How often we too misunderstand books and laboratories for the real secret. How often we too are distracted by a computer screen, all the while missing the soul of the world that throbs just outside our window. The Englishman has a very powerful message to teach us about technology; it is a tool, or a collection of tools.

Technology is the stuff we use. In the end it is just that, it is stuff. It is not people, it is not love, its not the soul of the world; technology is not the purpose of our lives. It is just the stuff that helps us along the journey.

Now we are in the midst of our own story about how we choose to use technology in the world. It's not difficult to predict that I would use this opportunity to talk about our church building. It is after all technology. It is a pile of stuff, engineered to help us do what we do as a church. If you are here for the first time, or you are just sort of new, you should know that this congregation has owned this building for the past 40 years. It has been our church home, and it has been a good home.

But the fact of the matter is, this space is too small for who we have grown to be. I say it is small not because it isn't as grand or awe inspiring the way some churches are. I actually love this building. I have only been the minister here for a short while and already it feels like a home. It feels like we all gather every week, for a big family meeting in our living room, and afterwards we have coffee together on the front porch. This building feels like a home, but this home is limiting who we are and who we are called to be. It is limiting our growth in numbers, but more importantly, it is limiting our growth in spirit.

When we literally run out of seats on some Sunday mornings, we are not practicing hospitality. When our children, from 5 years old, to 18 years old, are relegated to two classrooms in the basement, we cannot offer meaningful opportunities for religious and moral development. When our elder members cannot find a place to park at our church home, we cannot care for them, nor can we learn from their wisdom. We are outgrowing our church home, and we are looking for ways of dealing with that reality.

One very strong possibility is moving into a larger church building. Today after the worship service we will drive to see another building that we are

considering purchasing. It is a very different building, a much bigger building. A building that will allow space for us to welcome all who come to participate in what we have to offer.

But today, I hope we can remember the building is just a building. Like any technology, a larger building may be a means for us to fulfill our goal. It is a much larger space with classrooms for our children and room to grow. It's a space to develop into our mission of nurturing the spirit and healing the world, and seeking truth in love.

Like any technology, it can help us only as long as we keep our real goals in mind. The Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Laguna Beach is not an organization for real estate development. This is a church with the mission to nurture people's spirits, to heal the world, and to seek truth. We have a clear mission and it's one that we can pursue more fully with a larger space.

I've offered you three stories today. Two of them are tails of warning. Christopher McCandless rejected technology in a naïve and ultimately selfish pursuit of proving his independence. And the Englishman, well he was so obsessed with the technology, the tools to understand the world that he completely forgot that the soul of the world was all around him, in every moment. He could not see the forest for the trees.

The third story is our story, the story of our community's search for appropriate technology. Let this not be another story of warning. Let our story be one of hope, a story of finding the right tools to pursue our common dream.

Whether it's a church building or a means of communicating with each other, or the way we get from A to B, the fact is technology changes. Change happens. From the beginning of human history, we have created new and different ways of interacting with our environment and with each other. We are meaning-making

creatures and we will create new and presumably better ways of doing things, forever. Our task, our challenge, is to have the grace to use technology, and not to let it use us.

In theological terms, what we are talking about is idolatry. We don't use that language much anymore, but I think it can be VERY useful to talk about our lives, and our relationship with technology. Idolatry is not just the explicit worship of idols, like the golden calf of the Old Testament. Idolatry is something that happens to you and me quite often. It is mistaking something material, some pile of stuff, for what is sacred. Idolatry is placing our hopes and fear, our dreams, our love, into an object, rather than our brothers and sisters where it belongs. Idolatry, is getting stuck in the stuff, stuck in technology, and it is a sin.

In closing I want to remind you of the responsive reading that we all participated in earlier, "An Eternal Verity". The writer declares so beautifully, that just as long as humans have been concerned with the how to of life, the technology, they have also been concerned with the what for. Just as much as creating tools is a fundamental part of our being, so is responding compassionately to the Universe. From the reading we heard,

"we are children of one great love, united in our one eternal family. Ancient as the home is the temple; ancient as the workbench is the altar. Ancient as the sword is the sacrificial fire..."

As we go forward, may we have the grace to use technology wisely, and not allow technology to use us. And may we continue our business as a religious community holding up our ideals and values, knowing at the end of the day, what is important is not this pile of stuff, but, as the Englishman never saw, what is important is the soul of the world.

-Amen-

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