

“Tech-Knowledge”

Rev. Annie Holmes

Frankie put her hands into the warm sudsy water. Her hands had been cold all day. Standing next to her was her 10 her old son laughing and joking with his father as they dried and put away the dishes. Frankie mused, they hadn't done anything like this since they had gotten the dish washer years before. But since it had broken two nights ago, they realized they simply had to do the dishes if they were going to get done.

The water seemed so cleansing. With each dish she washed, she realized she was creating a rhythm, husband and son were following along. Memories flooded as Frankie remembered she and her sisters washing dishes so long ago. She even remembered how her one sister would take a clean plate and dirty it again and put it back on the counter so Frankie would have to wash it again. Sometimes she would wash the same plate 4 or 5 times. But they would be singing and laughing and often Frankie never noticed until later what her sister had done. “This is good,” she thought, “we are together, we are sharing. No TV, no interruptions.” Frankie was glad, she could hardly believe that she was glad, that the dish washer was actually broken!

Martin hadn't taken a pen in hand for longer than he could remember. On most evenings he would get home from work and start supper. Then he would log-on the Internet and after supper, chat in the chat room until Abby called him to help put the children to bed. Tonight, the monitor on the computer was broken. He had to leave it in the shop and realized he felt like he had left one of his friends at the hospital.

He fingered the space on the desk where the monitor had sat. Computer or not, he knew tonight he must write to his Dad, as he used to do on the computer. Taking the pen in hand seemed strange. Except to write his name on the checks he wrote for the rare check he wrote, he realized he really hadn't written much anymore. After he completed the letter to his Dad, Martin did something he hadn't done for years, he walked in the twilight glow down the block to the mailbox. He lifted the metal lid and dropped the letter inside, the lid clinking as he tuned away.

After he mailed the letter, he thought of all the old love letters he and Abby had written to each other as they were dating from different colleges. He spent the next 3 hours reading them. Memories flooded his brain of all that the two of them had meant to each other. Passion and love for his wife of 15 years burned in him again. He mused, would his children have any memories to relive if they only communicate in emails? He retied the faded red ribbon on the letters and returned them to the old shoe box. Martin vowed to write more letters in the future, ever after the computer returned.

Nick listened as his two young sons argued in their room upstairs. The fighting had

gotten worse between them in the last couple of weeks. He knew everyone had been together in the house for too many cold winter months. He slowly walked up the steps to see what the fracas was about tonight. Once again it was who cheated who on the Play Station game. Nick found his patience running thin. As he opened the door there they were, wrestling around on the floor each grabbing the control pad and kicking each other. Nick stepped in turned off the game and ordered both of them to get their shoes on, they were going for a walk. Kicking and hitting and sticking out their tongues at each other, the boys put on their coats and out the three of them went, dog in toe. Nick made them run as fast as they could to the corner and back. The stars were bright and clear and clean everywhere in the winter night sky. He showed them the belt of Orion and told the story of the might warrior in the sky. He showed them the Big and Little Dipper and talked some of the myths and legends of the North star. "Wow, cool!" the boys said. They threw snow balls and sang "Old McDonald Had a Farm" at the top of their lungs. Laughing, arms around each other, 3 souls connected on a winter night, when Nick turned off the Nintendo.

What would you do if for one week there was no electricity? What would you do with no TV, no phone, no fax, no computer, no CD player, no radio, nothing electric. How would you spend your evenings? Weekends? What would you do with your kids, your partner, your free time? What would you do if you only had your imagination, a book, a craft, an instrument, each other, how would that change the way you live?

Millions of people complain about the emotional and psychological tolls exacted by living in a high-tech world where the fast pace seems to leave little time for loved ones or private reflection. It seems for the first time since the 1960's, publications tell us, there is a growing debate about our technological society and its effects on humans. The debate has been re-energized because of three related events: 1. September 11, 2001, 2. a book written by Benjamin Barry entitled, "Jihad vs. McWorld" and 3. bills in Congress like "homeland security" that are seen by some to be total invasions into our personal computers and how we use them.

Benjamin Barry in his book "Jihad vs. McWorld" gives us a scenario that I feel looks at the way the Western world has expected the rest of the world to respond to the West's expectation that the whole world should be technological and that the whole world should be grateful for this opportunity. He states: "Just beyond the horizon of current events lie two possible political futures, both bleak, neither democratic. The first is re-tribalization of large swaths of humanity by war and bloodshed: a threatened organization of national states in which culture is pitted against culture, people against people, tribe against tribe-- a Jihad in the name of a hundred narrowly conceived faiths against every kind of interdependence, every kind of artificial social cooperation and civic mutuality.

The second is being borne in on us by the onrush of the world of fast music, fast computers and fast food, with MTV, Macintosh and McDonald's pressing nations into

one commercially homogenous global network... one McWorld tied together by technology, ecology, communications and commerce. The planet is falling apart and coming reluctantly together at the very same moment. The forces of Jihad and McWorld operate with equal strength in opposite directions, one driven by parochial hatreds, the other by universalizing markets, Jihad recreating ancient ethnic borders from within,/ McWorld making national borders porous from without. They have one thing in common; neither offers much hope to citizens looking for practical ways to govern themselves democratically.”

Since September 11th we have learned that whole schools of religious fanatics, of all faiths, have used the forcing of a technological world upon them by the West, as a reason to develop terrorists activities against the West as a means of preserving their faith and heritage. So, put this piece of insight over to the side for a moment, as I share another piece of our ever growing technological world that gives me pause...

Erik Davis, in his book “Tech-gnosis: Myth, Magic and Mysticism in the Age of Information,” reminds us, that as technology may extend our creative powers, it only does so by amputating, cutting off our natural powers. Think about that a minute, that could translate into every minute spent on some technological device, is time you are not spending in the natural world, connecting so to speak with the soft, animal side of yourself, that Mary Oliver speaks to in her poem, “Wild Geese.”

So, if you spend a combined 8 hours a day on the computer, the cell-phone, video games, palm pilot, etc. this also includes TV and movies, that is 8 hours of your life that you have not connected to the life-giving, sustaining and renewing connections that only the natural world can give. From all we hear of the benefits of technology in our lives, there is also a false magical claim that somehow technology will create a world that is peaceful, virtuous and wondrous. Remember that this is a tricky dream, though it seems a mighty difficult dream as a society to shake.

What we must remember or forget at our own peril, in this fast-paced growing technological world of ours, is that with each technological step we take as a human race, there is a benefit and a price. My question is; are we racing so fast to some supposed boundless potential within the world and ourselves that we are not sufficiently counting the cost? Are we so blinded by our computer screens that we cannot see what is happening to us? Are we so deafened by commercials and jarring music we cannot hear what is happening to us or our earth?

I fear we are on the verge of forgetting that the earth and nature and the person next to you do not always compute. We are told that those who watch TV and have most of their lives, are conditioned to a 12 minute story line in the sit-com fashion and then to 3.5 minutes of commercials. If indeed we are conditioned to that kind of presentation, we could miss the nuisances of this coming Summer season, because it unfolds in a much

different way than how we have been conditioned to expect information to come to us.

This carries over into our conversations and how we listen. The experts tell us because of the length of the storyline of a TV sitcom, and because so many of us have watched so many of them, we only are able to keep interest in what someone is saying for 8.5 minutes, then we expect that there will be a change. Which is one reason I threw out my TV and don't watch it any longer. I don't want to be further programmed by technology. I don't want to lose the animal side of my nature.

And if we expect everything in life to work as the technology we use everyday, fast and efficiently, we will be sorely disappointed when we find forgiveness and understanding one another, and people's emotional responses do not and cannot boot-up on a screen in 15 seconds. The seasons do not move at the fast-paced, unrealistic, hectic rhythm of technology. Are we losing the greatest lessons in life if we expect life to react as a computer does? How long do we listen to someone sharing something meaningful to them and want them to hurry it up? How long do we expect someone to grieve? How long do we expect ourselves to get over something? Are we as humans supposed to respond as quickly as I can move cards on my screen while playing Spider solitaire?

In our world of loud music, nervous communication, constant noise, will there be time for solitude? Will we have any privacy in an increasingly wired world? Will life in cyberspace be beneficial or detrimental to our sanity and our happiness? How necessary is high-tech? Just because we have high technology available to us, we still have the choice of how much we become a slave to the way technology does business. And what technology does do, is tend to intensify the differences between those who have technology and those who don't.

As a religious community leader I worry about the community of humanity. I know a woman who literally has stopped talking to her family in the evenings as she sat in front of the computer from 6:30 to 10:30 pm. I know a family who paid more than a \$1,000 on computer software and could hardly make their house payment that month. I counseled a family who had a daughter who committed suicide because her 400+ page PhD thesis that had taken her 3 years to write, had been wiped out on the hard drive of her computer by a virus. Isolated incidents. True. More prevalent than we ever imagine? Maybe.

One of my colleagues wrote in our minister's journal that after his computer was down for a week, he realized that perhaps the irritation of technologies is not that they complicate our living, but that we allow ourselves to be distracted by technology from the joy of living in common things. Common things like a spiritual practice, talking quietly at the evening meal, walking, reading, sitting near a fire, learning to play an instrument, doing and learning crafts, planting, being alone or quiet with ourselves.

Garret Ramstack, a child of my former church had an assignment. His third grade class

was asked to make a schedule of their day in 30 minute increments. Garret put on his schedule 30 minutes each day for -- day dreaming. Wisdom out of the mouths of babes. When I asked him if I could use what he did in his class in my sermon, he asked, "Why? Doesn't everyone know to do that already?" I think we would all be happier people if like Garret we knew to take at least 30 minutes each day to daydream.

Often we feel that technology has saved us and our world, given us more free time, but free time to do what? Do we take the time needed to be creative and let the creative process work within us? Is that how we use all the free time we have saved by having technology at our fingertips? How often have you felt your imagination has saved you?

A nun was held for 7 years in a closet in Iran in the early 80's when the Shah of Iran was overthrown. She was there doing missionary work and after the overthrow she was held as a hostage. They kept her alone and in a closet for much of seven years until she was released. The interviewer asked her how she possibly got through such an ordeal, and she answered that it was the hymns, prayers, poems and stories that she had memorized as a child that she repeated over and over again while in that closet. They were her companions, and along with the memorizations were the memories of each childhood time. Those things brought her joy.

The story goes that a king in a very remote land was visited at long last by explorers from the outside world. When the explorers discovered that the kingdom did not have a written language, no books, and no way to write, the explorers invited the king to learn their language and give them the alphabet. After considering the gift, the king said he knew this would not be a gift in the long run. He explained that no matter what happened to anyone in his kingdom they all knew all the stories, the myths, the history by memory and that could never be taken away as long as any one person from the kingdom lived. He felt that would all be lost if people depended on the written word rather than what they knew in their hearts and memories.

What do we know in our hearts? What do we know from memory? What stories can you tell without looking at a book, or what songs can you sing from memory? What stories can you tell your children or grandchildren at night about the ancestors of your family? What stories do you tell yourself when you are alone in the middle of the night stewing about a problem? What do we know from our hearts?

Strip away the CD player, the Internet, the walkman's and what do we know from heart, in our hearts? It may mean the difference between living simply by heart or living a life that is powered by always being plugged in. The Tao te Ching reminds us; in seeking happiness, "In dwelling, live close to the ground, in thinking, keep to the simple, in conflict, be fair and generous, in governing, don't try to control, in work, do what you enjoy, in family life, be completely present."

Walk cautiously into Radio Shack, Best Buy and Circuit City and remember you may have 100 messages on your email to answer, but there are messages, other messages for you also in the people around you, the trees, the rivers, the sunset, and the animal side of your soul. So after you have answered your emails, take time for those other messages too. And here is one very different message in which you can be plugged into. Not so technology, but rather something I have tried to learn from heart. A whole new plugged in...

THE FIVE WONDERFUL PRECEPTS **Adapted from the Writings of Thich Nhat Hanh**

1. Aware of the suffering caused by the **destruction of life**, I vow to cultivate compassion and learn ways to protect the lives of people, animals, and plants. I will not kill, not to let others kill, and will not condone any act of killing in the world, in my thinking and in my way of life. I will involve myself in actions that protect and support life.

2. Aware of the suffering caused by **exploitation, social injustice, stealing, and oppression**, I vow to cultivate loving kindness and learn ways to work for the well-being of people, animals and plants. I vow to live simply and practice generosity by sharing my time, energy and material resources with those who are in real need. I will not steal or possess anything that should belong to others. I will respect the property of others, and I will prevent others from profiting from human suffering or the suffering of other species on Earth. I will not lose awareness of the existence of suffering in the world.

Aware of the suffering caused by **attachment**, I will seek not to be bound to any doctrine, theory, or ideology. I will regard systems of thought as guiding means rather than absolute truth. I will try to be open to receive other's views and be always ready to learn.

Aware of the suffering caused by negative states of mind, I will maintain neither anger nor hatred. As soon as anger or hatred arise, I will practice meditation on compassion in order to deeply understand the persons who have caused anger or hatred. I will learn to look at other beings with the eyes of compassion. I will practice breathing consciously in order to achieve composure of body and mind and to develop concentration and deepened understanding.

3. Aware of the suffering caused by **sexual misconduct**, I vow to cultivate responsibility and learn ways to protect the safety and integrity of individuals, couples, families, and society. I am determined not to engage in sexual relations without love and a long-term commitment. To preserve the happiness of myself and others, I will respect my commitments and the commitments of others. I will do everything in my power to protect children from sexual abuse and to protect couples and families from being broken by sexual misconduct.

4. Aware of the suffering caused by **unmindful speech** and the inability of people to listen to others, I vow to cultivate loving speech and deep listening in order to bring joy and happiness to others and to relieve others of their suffering. Knowing that words can create happiness or suffering, I vow to learn to speak truthfully, with words that inspire self-confidence, joy, and hope. I will not spread news that I do not know to be certain or criticize or condemn things of which I am not sure. I will refrain from uttering words that can cause division or discord, or that can cause the family or the community to break. I will make all efforts to reconcile and resolve all conflicts, however small.

5. Aware of the suffering caused by **unmindful consumption**, I vow to cultivate good health, both physical and mental, for myself, my family, and my society by practicing mindful eating, drinking, and consuming. I vow to ingest only items that preserve peace, well-being, and joy in my body, in my consciousness, and in the collective body and consciousness of my family and society. I am determined not to use alcohol or any other intoxicant or to ingest foods or other items that contain toxins, such as certain TV programs, magazines, books, films, and conversations. I am aware that to damage my body or my consciousness with these poisons is to betray my ancestors, my parents, my society, and future generations. I will work to transform violence, fear, anger, and confusion in myself and in society by my practice.

"Tech-Knowledge
vs.
What Is Known By Heart"