

Religion in a Digital Age

A Sermon Delivered on February 21, 2010
by
The Reverend Axel H. Gehrman

*“Is TCP/IP another name for God?”
-- Rabbi Yosef Y. Kazem*

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Reading: by Carol Lee Sanchez, who teaches American Indian and Women's Studies, from an essay entitled "New World Tribal Communities"

Tribal peoples around the world honor and therefore celebrate life in all its aspects, its disasters along with its riches, and so I always suggest that as a group, we formally acknowledge some important aspect of our current daily lives by ceremonially celebrating it. The groups choose what they wish to celebrate and how they will do so formally. I have participated in naming ceremonies for infants and renaming ceremonies for adults, ceremonies dedicated to the changing seasons, to the cleansing of rivers, to the thoughtful appreciation of nearby forests, to the sharing of our human energies with a grove of dying trees. I have listened to newly created birth songs, baking, shopping, driving, and working songs, peace chants and ceremonies, women's power chants and songs, men's power chants and songs. I believe it is time to create new songs of acknowledgement as well as ceremonies that include metals, petrochemicals, and fossil fuels, electricity, modern solar power systems, and water power systems. I also believe it is very important to make sacred, to acknowledge the new ways and elements of our lives - from nuclear power (which is buried in our Earth and activates our Sun) to plastics and computers. It is time now, again, for the entire world to honor these Spirits, these new molecular forms in order to restore harmony and balance to our out-of-control systems and in particular, to our modern technologies.

Reading: by Peggy Orenstein, from an article entitled "Stop Your Search Engines" (*New York Times Magazine*, Oct 25, 2009)

Not long ago, I started an experiment in self-binding: intentionally creating an obstacle to behavior I was helpless to control, much the way Ulysses lashed himself to his ship's mast to avoid succumbing to the Sirens' song. In my case, though, the irresistible temptation was the Internet. But before I began, I wondered about the genesis of the term "self-binding." So I hopped online and found Jon Elster, a professor of political science at Columbia University, whose book "Ulysses Unbound" explores whether voluntarily restricting your choices enhances or curtails freedom.

That reminded me: I hadn't read "The Odyssey" since college, and because I was pretty sure that my copy was at the bottom of a carton of books in faraway Minneapolis, I Googled the original text. I browsed several versions before downloading what seemed like the best translation. Because my interest lay specifically with the Sirens (quick Web break to make sure that should be uppercase), I sifted through a variety of classicists' interpretations of their role. Then — and this seemed reasonable enough — I searched for the "Sirens" episode in James Joyce's "Ulysses." I can't quite recollect how I got to the video for the song "Sirens," by the alternative rock group AVA, but that put me in mind of Blink-182 (with whom AVA shares a frontman), so I clicked over to that band's site to check for any updates on the release of its new album, then watched its reunion performance from February's Grammy Awards. . . . When I looked up, three and a half hours had passed.

And that is why I need the mast. It came in the form of an app called Freedom, which blocks your Internet access for up to eight hours at a stretch. The only way to get

back online is to reboot your computer, which — though not as foolproof as, say, removing the modem entirely and overnighting it to yourself (another strategy I've contemplated) — is cumbersome and humiliating enough to be an effective deterrent. The program was developed by Fred Stutzman, a graduate student in information and library science, whose own failsafe self-binding technique — writing at a cafe without Internet access — came undone when the place went wireless. "We're moving toward this era where we'll never be able to escape from the cloud," he told me. "I realized the only way to fight back was at an individual, personal level."

Freedom, which runs only on Macs, is downloaded more than 4,000 times a month.

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I few weeks ago I finally took the plunge. I finally broke down and purchased a cell phone for my own personal use.

Our family has been heading in this direction for some time. A year ago Elaine and I set up a cell phone plan primarily for our children, who were 13 and 15 at the time. They had long been asking for their own phones. All their friends had cell phones, they said. Our goal was to allow our growing kids a greater degree of independence, and to avoid making them telecommunications-outcasts among their peers. But also, we liked the idea of having a way to reach them, when they are out and about with their buddies, which increasingly occurs later in the evening.

At that point Elaine and I also got a phone, to share. Neither of us was too eager to brave the new frontier of a cellular life, so our phone spent most of its time gathering dust in a dining room drawer.

The reason we decided to take our cell phone use to the next level, is that Elaine started a new job in Rantoul this month and needs to be available on her own cell phone line. My new phone is primarily to help the four members of our household keep our channels of communications open, even as our respective schedules grow increasingly complex. That, anyway, is the sensible and reasonable rationalization I developed to justify the plunge. But that is only part of truth.

You see, I didn't get just any cell phone. I got an iphone. And, truth be told, ever since the iphone was introduced two years ago, I have been toying with the idea of getting one. Not because I really need it, but because it is so cool.

An iphone is not only a cell phone, but also a portable computer on which I can check my email, surf the internet, use any of several thousand applications, and keep my calendar.

Now, I imagine for several of you, this may not seem like a big deal. At the end of committee meetings, when it's time to schedule our next get-together, I have noticed that about half of you pull out some kind of electronic handheld gadget. That's where many of you have long kept your schedule.

But for me this is momentous change. As some of you know, I have always had a very deep and profound connection with my pocket calendar. After decades of careful consideration, I found the perfect size and shape and system to keep track of my life, with the help of a pencil and a calendar like this (show calendar). The year before it looked like this (show identical calendar). And the year before it looked like this (show identical calendar). Well, you get the idea.

To give up this treasured tradition, and to entrust my life to an electronic gadget on which oodles of information are invisibly stored, this is really a leap of faith for me. Drop it, spill some tea on it, accidentally delete stuff, download a virus, or simply lose access to a charger and I am in serious trouble.

Why would I do this? Because, if I believe what the advertisements say, and if I believe friends and colleagues who have long ago made the leap, it will make me more productive and efficient. It will make my life much easier, much simpler, much calmer.

So far, however, that has not been the case. So far, having a phone in my pocket that rings at unexpected moments makes me jumpy. So far, being able to check my email messages every few minutes, wherever I am, makes me more scattered rather than more efficient. Skimming articles on the internet whenever I have a few moments to spare isn't really helping me be better informed. It is more of a distraction.

Not surprisingly, psychologists have determined that “wireless intrusions ruin conversational rapport” in old-fashioned face-to-face conversations. “Distracted cell phone users tend to be oblivious to the negative effects of wireless disruptions.” (*Psychology Today*, Jul/Aug, 2006)

As I test the temptations of a wired life, I am gaining a deeper appreciation for those quiet times when all ringing phones are out of earshot, and when there are no email messages nagging to be read. It is slowly dawning on me that those few moments wasted waiting in the kitchen for the water to boil, gazing absentmindedly out the kitchen window rather than skimming yet another newspaper editorial, perhaps these moments weren't wasted after all. Maybe they were precious opportunities for a restless mind to relax. And in those few moments gain a glimmer, not of information out there on the world wide web, but of a different kind of information lingering in the hidden corners of the mind.

* * *

Peggy Orenstein's addictive internet behavior sounds very familiar to me, and I imagine to many others.

There is something seductive in our newfound ability to be forever electronically connected - whether to each other, or to an ocean of information, that beckons us to play in its waters, all the while neglecting to mention the dangers of drowning in the stormy waves of information overload.

After frittering away several hours on her freewheeling internet research, Orenstein learned that the metaphor of Ulysses lashing himself to the mast of his ship, in order to hear the Sirens' song without succumbing to their entreaties, is a very apt metaphor, indeed. As those of you familiar with the story know, the Sirens seduced sailors not with beauty or carnality, but with the promise of limitless knowledge. The Sirens sang "over all the generous earth we know everything that happens." They promised any sailor who approached them, he would emerge a "wiser man." Instead every sailor who did so ended up losing his life.

Though less lethal, the internet's promise is also misleading. It promises infinite knowledge, but actually delivers merely infinite information - the vast majority of which is trivial, disjointed, and irrelevant to us. After surfing its waves for hours, we often emerge no wiser for it.

"As alluring as we can find the perpetual pursuit of little thoughts," Orenstein writes, "the net result may only be to prevent us from forming the big ones."

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A wired world brings with it new trials and temptations. But that is not to say I would wish it away. Computer technology does provide us with many potential benefits. Furthermore, access to the internet around the world is growing at an incredible speed.

In 1995 there were perhaps 16 million internet users worldwide. Within five years that figure had multiplied twenty-fold to 378 million. By September of last year the number of internet users was well over 1.7 billion.

Computer enthusiasts often imagine the world wide web will provide an unprecedented democratization of information, as well as radical opportunities for grassroots political organization, solidarity and social justice. And while there is good reason to be hopeful, we also need to remember that the internet can also create new divisions between the internet haves and have-nots. In 2001 there were more internet domains in the city of London than in all of Africa. Less than one percent of Africa's people were internet users.

According to the latest figures from Nielson Online, in the United States about three out of every four citizens uses the internet. Among the members of this church, I bet the number is even higher.

Our computer habits have changed so quickly and have affected so many of us, it is impossible to ignore. The internet has become an integral aspect of church

communication, whether in terms of the website we are perpetually trying to improve, or the email messages fired back and forth among us, whether in scheduling meetings with a program called doodle, or collaborating with google.docs.

But despite the rise in our collective level of computer-literacy, we are not all on equal footing when it comes to traveling the circuitous roads the information superhighway.

While most of us do have access to computers and the internet, not all of us have the same ability to put these tools to good use. Computer operations that seem simple to some of us, are mysterious and perplexing to others. And so even as we try to create more sophisticated channels of electronic inclusivity, we may actually be building barriers of exclusion, which allow the computer savvy entrance, while the uninitiated are locked out.

* * *

Our technology is a tool that can serve constructive or destructive ends. It can unite us or divide us. It can provide a path to greater knowledge and understanding, or it can overload us with all things trivial and superficial, obscuring our sense of wholeness, sapping our spirits, leaving us in a fog of confusion.

Carol Lee Sanchez says there is “an ever-widening gulf between “daily life” and “spirituality” among discerning educated people, particularly in Europe and the United States. This chasm is more than separation of church from state; it is separation of “Self” from “Spirit”...”

The problem, she says, lies in the fact that our culture is “based in agrarian social structures and [has] not incorporated “modern” science and technology into [its] philosophic underpinnings. It is this omission that is causing the stress, pain, and dichotomy conscious and intelligent people are experiencing today.”

Unlike those religious scholars who think of the sacred as something separate and distinct from the profane aspects of our lives, Sanchez is grounded in a holistic worldview in which “the profane is sacred, and spirituality is applicable to every mundane aspect of our daily lives.”

That’s why our religious ceremonies must celebrate not only the so-called “natural” world, but the whole world, which includes everything from petrochemicals to nuclear power, everything from plastics to computers.

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It is a mistake to imagine a deep divide between all things technical and all things spiritual. We must broaden our religious imagination to meaningfully embrace all aspects of our lives.

The Jewish author Joshua Hammerman remembers the nineteenth-century Hasidic master Rabbi Nachman, who wrote, “It is good to have a special room set aside for sacred study and prayer, secluded meditation and conversation with God.”

With this thought in mind, Hammerman suggests this spiritual practice:

“Sit down in front of your computer after midnight and see what is there. Reach out to connect - and not necessarily with people. Simply connecting to the latest news, to stock results or late ball scores, is enough to evoke a feeling of “humble surrender” and awe. How lovely can this universe be, how orderly and sound, when, without waking a soul, I can order cut-rate plane tickets to [New York]? How close to the mountaintop can you ascend, when, with a few clicks, you can see the deep blue earth from the perspective of a roving satellite hundreds of miles up? How dusty must my weary pilgrim’s feet get, when I can click my way to a live shot Jerusalem’s Western Wall in seconds, and fax my prayer to be placed within its ancient cracks? Mircea Eliade, a modern master of the study of the Sacred, writes of a sacred space as a place of breakthrough, a point of passage to another realm, an absolute reality. From where can we jump off into a higher world if not from a springboard whose range appears so limitless? Who would have thought that the “road less traveled” could be so easily located on the Information Superhighway?” (*thelordismyshepherd.com*, p. 113)

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New technologies are entering our lives every day. Whether these innovations serve to draw us together, or drive us apart, depends on us. Whether they become sources of inspiration or desperation, depends on us. Whether they put us on a path toward complete mindlessness and greater mindfulness, depends on us. We need to pay attention.

May we remember that all creation is sacred,
And may we see every moment of every day
As an opportunity to be mindful of the wholeness
- the holiness - of all of our lives.

Amen.