

We Are Not Gadgets
Rev. Diane Rollert
The Unitarian Church of Montreal, 4 December 2011

Here's the picture. I'm sitting with my laptop on my lap. I've got at least ten windows open – windows on my computer, that is. Within each window is another resource for today's sermon: An article sent to me by my son: *Is Google Making Us Stupid?* by Nicholas Carr. Carr's article has linked me to another article: *The Pancake People or "The Gods Are Pounding My Head"* by Richard Foreman. In another window, I can hear the sounds of radio host Krista Tippett interviewing Sherry Turkle, founder and director of the MIT Initiative on Technology and Self. Another window displays the transcript of the interview. In yet another window, there's the website that has delivered Gilles Vigneault's lyrics *Avec nos yeux* for today's reading (I actually found the song in a printed book, but the web saved me from having to retype the words). There is a host of documents open in Word to write notes, and to prepare openings and offerings. To my left is my iPhone, my indispensable always-on-call-always-connected-to-my-contacts-e-mail-calendar-music-photos-solitaire-angry birds-complete-library-of-classic-novels-to-read-in-the-dark-at-night-and-on-the-metro favourite tool and toy. To my right is David's iPad open to an electronic version of Jaron Lanier's book *You Are Not a Gadget*.

Underlying it all, there's the ping, ping, ping of my e-mail coming in. Yes, I could turn off the sound, but there's nothing like e-mail when you're procrastinating about what to write next. It gives you that noble sense that you are always working, when you'd otherwise be staring at the wall. Overlaying it all is a window open to an article from *Wired* magazine about futurist Ray Kurzweil. Who? Some guy who takes 210 vitamin pills a day so that he will live well into the middle of this century. He doesn't want to miss the moment when the artificial intelligence of computers will outstrip the capacity of the human brain and we will become one consciousness known as the Singularity.

The Singularity. The Noosphere. Who comes up with these words? These are our modern day philosophers imagining what's going to happen as technology accelerates even farther beyond our comprehension. We all know how powerful computers have become in such a short period of time. As Jaron Lanier writes, "It's as if you kneel to plant a seed of a tree and it grows so fast that it swallows your whole village before you can even rise to your feet."

So what's next? Some say that we humans will become bystanders to the history that machines will create, while others like Kurzweil say that the artificial extension of our intelligence will enable us to literally become immortal. My very human brain is having a hard time wrapping itself around these ideas.

They say that if you were to take the most powerful electron microscope possible and focus in on human beings and the material world that surrounds us, it would become clear that everything we know and experience is nothing more than indistinguishable particles, a sea of energy and intention, nothing else. The same thing is true in The Cloud. Somewhere out there in space is this place where all information is coming to be stored, where everything

we write and post online becomes fragments like ions and electrons. In the nebulous gathering together of all this electronic stuff we do, a disjointed reality is forming. The uniqueness of literary works, the beauty of a poem, the heartfelt story that once had a beginning, a middle and an end, all become a random mishmash of words and phrases, images, bits and bytes to be reassembled at anyone's will. No beginning, no end, just a cloud of indistinguishable data that could come to control our lives. I can hear the voice of HAL the computer in Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*: "I can feel it. I can feel it. I'm afraid."

I have Nicholas Carr to thank for reminding me about HAL. Carr says that he and his literary companions are finding that the way their brains work is shifting. Maybe there's no scientific proof yet, but he knows he's lost the ability to read and concentrate deeply. He writes:

"...media theorist Marshall McLuhan pointed out in the 1960s, media are not just passive channels of information. They supply the stuff of thought, but they also shape the process of thought. And what the Net seems to be doing is chipping away my capacity for concentration and contemplation. My mind now expects to take in information the way the Net distributes it: in a swiftly moving stream of particles. Once I was a scuba diver in the sea of words. Now I zip along the surface like a guy on a Jet Ski."

As a preacher, I know this phenomenon well. I couldn't do what I do without the Internet. But once upon a time it was sufficient to spend days of reflection on one brief Biblical passage. Now there's just too much out there to be satisfied with a single printed paragraph. And, yes, I do love this ever-expanding world that feels so real and immediate and is always there for the exploring, 24/7. I can't say for sure that my powers of concentration have changed, but I do know there are times when I crave simplicity and deeper focus. There is this constant tension I feel between a love of being plugged in and a longing to unplug.

Richard Forman writes with caution:

"I see within us all (myself included) the replacement of complex inner density with a new kind of self evolving under the pressure of information overload and the technology of the 'instantly available'. A new self that needs to contain less and less of an inner repertory of dense cultural inheritance—as we all become "pancake people"—spread wide and thin as we connect with that vast network of information accessed by the mere touch of a button.

"Will this produce a new kind of enlightenment or 'super-consciousness'? Sometimes I am seduced by those proclaiming so—and sometimes I shrink back in horror at a world that seems to have lost the thick and multi-textured density of deeply evolved personality."

In short, the Internet Gods are pounding our heads and we are turning into pancakes. And, dear Web Surfer beware! Google is watching us so carefully that our Internet searches only turn up what Google thinks we want to find. So, if you are a bleeding heart liberal like me, you'll find lots of bleeding heart liberal resources to confirm your worldview. That means that a conservative on the opposite end of the political spectrum from me is being served a

steady diet of conservative resources when they search the web. Google isn't even inviting us to enter into each other's domains. They believe they are doing us a favour by figuring out our individual natures through our web surfing habits. We have this illusion that we have the world at our fingertips, when we're really only getting some artificially intelligent machine's reconstituted slice of the picture. That's a chilling thought.

Enter Sherry Turkle, who recently published the book *Alone Together*. Turkle says, "Just because we grew up with the Internet, we think that the Internet is all grown up." But really, it's still in its infancy and we have the right and the responsibility to shape how it will affect our lives in the future.

When Turkle first started the research for her book, she assumed that she'd be writing about children and technology and how they were driving parents crazy. Instead, she discovered that it was the parents who had become addicted to their BlackBerries, who couldn't stop texting, surfing the web or responding to e-mails. They had come to model the very behaviour they had wanted to discourage, leaving their children "feeling lonely and alone." Turkle says that the greatest gift you could give your child is to go to the park together and leave your phone at home.

In fact, what we are failing to teach our children is how to be alone. As Jaron Lanier puts it, constant connection assuages separation anxiety. Announcing every detail of your life on services like Twitter enables you to avoid "the empty room, the screaming vacuum of an isolated mind." But in the process, you never really learn how to be with yourself. You never learn how to be in the present moment. Constant connection keeps you reacting to someone else's thoughts. There's no time for inner depth.

Okay, I don't tweet and I don't really do Facebook, even if I accept everyone's friend requests. So maybe I'm a member of the e-mail generation. Lately, I've been feeling as though I've fallen into this e-mail and meeting doodle maelstrom. Words, dates, times and tension are swirling around me and I just want it to stop. I'm on communication overload. The web may be changing the way we think. It is also changing the way we interact in communities.

Once upon a time you wrote a letter on a piece of paper, by hand or with a typewriter. It took time to sign and time to mail. You thought about what you were doing, and in most cases your communication was with one person. You didn't have this convenient and dangerous button you could press that said "Reply All." If you wanted to send out a group communication, it took a lot of thought and effort. Now we send missives showering into cyberspace, not knowing how they are read, if they are read, or what pieces are taken out of context. Communications that should happen between individuals are being played out in the group arena. It's as if we are all skimming the surface on jet skis, going way past the speed limit, and crashing into each other before it is too late.

The Internet is there for us 24/7, without boundaries. We can send out our messages at all hours. But we need breaks and we need boundaries. We need to learn how to be truly

present to each other again. Otherwise, the danger is that we are becoming gadgets.

Back in October I received this great article by Doug Zelinski, Director of Leadership Development in the Mass Bay District of the UUA. Yep, I sent it out to some of our leaders, and I'm sure they probably felt spammed. But hang in, I keep coming back to it. So much so, that I have to preach it. Doug writes:

I will confess to almost starting three email flame wars. If you are unfamiliar with the phrase, this is when one email triggers a nasty response from the recipient, who also shares it with others. As the interchange escalates so do the number of people drawn into the demeaning, self-righteous, bitter and even shocking interchange. And, yes, this was church-related.

I don't actually know how email flame wars end because, fortunately, I never pressed the "send" button. I had indulged my own self-righteous anger long enough to write the scathing email but withdrew my finger from the trigger in time. What I remember most is how much time and energy that self-indulgence cost and how exhausted it all made me feel.

Conflict costs. Whether we trigger flame wars or suppress conflict with polite denials, it costs. The price we pay is our time, attention, and energy. Some members pay that price until they are spiritually wounded or even bankrupt. But other members have learned to leverage conflict so the time and energy it costs becomes their investment in the beloved community.

One critical sign of a vital congregation is not the absence of conflict but rather the presence of members who approach conflict as faith formation. Every conflict we encounter provides the opportunity for each of us to re-examine our relationship to the mission of the congregation and the values of our faith community. Better still, it then usually requires us to act on those values -- faith in action of the most personal kind.

Conflict is inevitable. In fact, it's normal. In the last five years, 65% of all congregations across denominations report having high levels of conflict. What matters is how we choose to pay the price -- on the road to bankruptcy or on the path to beloved community.

Those conflict figures are no fluke, and I am sure that behind every bitter fight there's a lot of electronic exchange. Over the years, I've seen several e-mail flame wars (and near wars) here where the individuals involved realized afterwards that it would have been better if they had dealt with their feelings and concerns face to face. Some of this gets seen, and some is so insidious that it simply creeps into the fabric of any congregation's life without our realizing it. I'm not saying that we can't have dynamic, inspiring exchanges online with each other. But to do so requires real skill.

Sherry Turkle says that if we are going to "make our life livable, we have to have spaces where we are fully present to each other or to ourselves, where we're not competing with

the roar of the Internet...” This is the sacred space that we seem to be missing these days in our interactions. Real life, my friends, is messy. Real life on hyper-cyber drive gets even messier and all our errors get preserved forever in the Cloud. Love in a relationship takes work, and so does beloved community. One place we start is by meeting each other face to face to work together to create a covenant of how we will treat each other on- and off-line.

Unplugging for the holidays may not be a realistic option for all of us. But in this season that dares to dream of peace, may we find ways to reassert our humanity. Not so long ago, the original web was developed by the cooperative efforts of hundreds and then millions of individuals who worked together for no financial, political or other gain, than to create something “solely because it was a good idea and it was beautiful,” Joran Lanier writes. “At the core was a sweet faith in human nature.” They were much like the early Unitarians and Universalists (in fact Tim Berners-Lee, who is credited as the inventor of the World Wide Web, is an honest to goodness Unitarian Universalist). If we become more conscious of our relationship to the web as it exists now, maybe we’ll have a prayer of getting back to that garden.