

Sunday October 18, 2009

**Thoughts to ponder at the beginning:**

**Lud·dite** (lŭd'īt) n.

1. Any of a group of British workers who between 1811 and 1816 rioted and destroyed laborsaving textile machinery in the belief that such machinery would diminish employment.
2. One who opposes technical or technological change.  
[After Ned Ludd, an English laborer who was supposed to have destroyed weaving machinery around 1779.]

— <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/luddite>

We find God on the Internet because it binds us all as One.

— Joshua Hammerman in *thelordismyshepherd.com*

**Reading**

Words of David A. Cooper, from his book *Silence, Simplicity, and Solitude*

Forty days have been spent in silence and solitude. It has been a time filled with spiritual practice and meditation. All day is passed inside this room, except for brief excursions to the outhouse or to pick up food supplies at the drop point. The days begin early, between two and three in the morning. I sit quietly in meditation; I pace quietly in meditation; I sit again. An observer peeking through the window might think, “He is doing nothing at all. He must be terribly bored. What a waste of time!”

Inside this world the experience is often just the opposite. It is true that there are times filled with boredom. Yet, there are also periods filled with light when everything seems exquisite and nothing is trivial. At those times, when I do something as simple as moving my arm I am often amazed. Volumes could be written about this simple movement. If it were studied in infinitesimal detail, the template of the universe would be revealed. I gaze at an ant moving across the floor. It is fascinating. Marvelous ideas arise that I never previously contemplated. At those times, I am in a state of rapture. The universe is so extraordinary, I wonder why most of us spend our lives in a way that ignore the nature of creation.

If I were able to look out the window upon the world of busy people, the thought might arise, “They are doing and appreciating so little, they must be terribly bored!” (pp. 5-6)

**Sermon**

Luddite Lite

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This is the true story about why I got a cell phone.

Some years ago, my son was enrolled in a summer camp at his preschool. One day I hopped into my 14-year-old, un-air-conditioned Chevy Nova just a few minutes later than ideal for picking my son up at the end of the day.

“That’s OK,” I said to myself. “I’ll just take the highway to gain some time.”

I turned left onto the entrance ramp to the highway... and entered one of the biggest traffic snarls that particular highway had ever endured. I pulled to a dead stop...and sat... fully aware that my son’s preschool was closing in just a few minutes.

As I sweltered in my car – windows rolled down as far as they would go – I gazed around me at my fellow travelers. They were all driving new cars, fancy cars. Air-conditioned cars. Moreover, they were all talking on cell phones – no doubt notifying people that they would be late.

As I wiped sweat from my forehead and watched the hands on my analog watch tick the minutes away, the thought occurred to me: Maybe one of those people would make the call for me! I looked around. Everyone had their windows tightly rolled up. No one would hear me if I shouted.

Occasionally traffic inched forward, placing a new assortment of cars within my view. I scanned every one of them. More cell phones. More rolled up windows. Until all of a sudden a posh car rolled alongside me. Unaccountably, every window was rolled down.

“Excuse me!” I yelled to the driver. “Do you have a cell phone?”

“Yes,” he yelled back. “Who do you want me to call?”

I thought quickly. I couldn’t remember the school’s phone number, so I said, “Call my husband.”

I gave him the number. As he punched it in, he yelled, “What’s his name?”

“Steve” I yelled back.

“What should I tell him?” I began to answer, but just then Steve evidently picked up the phone, because my traffic companion said, “Hi, Steve? My name is Steve, too, and I’m sitting here on the highway with your wife.”

That was when I decided to get a cell phone.

My intent today is not to disparage technology. Technology is neither good nor bad. It simply *is*. That’s all. The ways we relate to our high tech world can bring blessings or curses upon us. We can use technology or abuse it. So to say technology is bad is to lift from our own shoulders the responsibility for the choices we need to make about our lives. Better to figure out ways to live with the change – harnessing it, even, for our benefit.

Besides, I often like technology – sometimes a lot. How many of us have had medical technology save our lives at some point? I know I have.

Steve and I never would have married if it were not for computers. We met while working at Digital Equipment Corp., a company that made mini-computers. I have Steve's permission to tell you this: As many of you know, Steve sometimes stutters when he speaks. But he writes beautifully. In those days interoffice email provided the conduit through which our early friendship developed. I do not apologize for the role technology played in bringing us together. In my view, only good has resulted.

I owe a lot to people who try new ideas, push inventions into new realms, and ask questions that open doors to new advances. So I am no Luddite. I do not lament the high tech world we live in. I do, however, sometimes observe people, including myself, wrestle with spiritual challenges technology can create for us.

While much can be said about all kinds of technology, I will limit my remarks to personal computers and cell phones. They are the elements of the high tech world where I see people struggle most consistently on a daily basis.

In my view, computers and cell phones present challenges that fall in three arenas: Our relationships with others; our relationship to our inner selves, and our relationship to what we hold most high. To me, any comprehensive spiritual journey needs to touch on all three of those areas – connections with others, with self, and with the larger spirit of life and love.

There is no doubt the high tech revolution has put people in touch with others. Through the Internet, we can be in personal contact with people all over the world. We can access boundless information with complete ease. We can mobilize large numbers of people by using electronic communication in all its many guises.

Now that I live far from friends and family, email helps to keep me stay in touch with the people I love. Through Facebook, I can see the pictures posted by my photographer brother in Denver. And I can follow the new chapter in the life of my Belgian friend who is currently studying in Quebec City. Because she writes in Dutch for her friends back home, I now keep my Dutch-English dictionary beside my computer.

Through church websites I can read newsletters and listen to the sermons of many of my friends – and they can read our newsletter and listen to some of my sermons, too. I am grateful for those opportunities.

Moreover, in recent months, as lobbyists have gained the ascendancy in health care reform, I have come to wonder if the Internet might provide a tool for grassroots organizing that allows the voice of the people to be heard. I see that happening with the No on One campaign, so much of which is conducted through emails and website links.

I see it with the advocacy-for-the earth events planned for next Saturday, October 24. Our church is joining forces with St. Paul's, First Parish, and Bowdoin College as part of the worldwide observance. How did that come to be? Because an electronic campaign is

connecting people all over the globe urging them to organize public events to promote awareness of climate change.

Now of course anyone can use the Internet for any purpose – even nefarious purposes. But still, I feel, as a grassroots organizing tool, the Internet is currently one of the best available. I am grateful for that.

Alongside those good things, I lay this caution: High tech communications can fracture human relationships, if we let them. Some of the ways are obvious: Some communication on the Internet is shallow. Facebook, for example, is notorious for mindless chatter. Deeper communication often requires real discussion, face-to-face meeting – even working side by side, hip to hip and elbow to elbow. Gazing at a computer screen is no substitute. Yet, too often, I fear, people rely on – or hide behind – that computer screen.

Then too, electronic communication is sometimes unfortunate – the badly phrased note that gets misinterpreted, the rants that sound more harsh on the screen, the ill manners people take license to adopt when no living human being is nearby.

And there are the cell phones that interrupt, blaring their insistence that the person on the phone is more important than anyone else you are with or anything else you are doing. How many of you have had meal interrupted when someone answered a cell phone call or retrieved a text message? I know I have. It makes me feel kind of insignificant sometimes.

And of course there are the safety issues. I suspect you, like me, have been nearly mown down by someone chattering on a cell phone while driving a giant pickup truck.

Those pitfalls of modern communication are well covered and widely lamented, but for me a critical spiritual issue has to do with *availability*. We live in a culture where people increasingly expect us to be available all the time. Just because we have a cell phone, we should be available. Just because we have email, we should be reachable – all the time. What does that expectation of availability do to our souls, I wonder?

I worry about the depletion of patience – in others and in myself – as we increase our cultural expectations about instant communication. That depletion of patience is a spiritual issue. Our relationships – *all* relationships – if they are to thrive, require patience.

I worry, too, that our sense of boundaries becomes muddied as we create a society where everyone appears to be available all the time.

When do we claim uninterrupted time for ourselves? When do we allow others to do so?

For me those are spiritual questions. Our relationships – *all* relationships – if they are to thrive, require uninterrupted time. Friendships and love relationships just might grow deeper if we turn occasionally off our cell phones and ignore the little beep on our

computers that heralds the arrival of a new email. Our relationships to our inner soul just might grow deeper, too, if we heed the same restrictions.

Which brings me to our relationships to our inner selves.

My own particular inner self struggles to stay organized. And so I appreciate many of the electronic organization aids. I love it that our newsletter is now available on our website. Now I always know where to find it! I love that I can store phone numbers in my telephone's memory. No more hunting for those tiny scraps of paper! I love my system for keeping track of worship materials on my computer. Those things are all wonderful.

Here's where I see myself and others struggle, though. Computers make incalculably huge mountains of information available, instantly, with a few keystrokes. How easy it is to be overwhelmed by the sheer body of knowledge available to master!

Electronic calendars make it possible to schedule every waking moment – and even some sleeping ones, it would seem, judging by the weighty schedules I observe some folks struggling to meet. It can be tempting to give over our hours to a sea of activity.

Too much sitting in front of the computer screen reading just one more article or blog, and too much adopting restricting and hectic schedules leads to a depletion of soul. We can so easily become so busy doing that we have no time for appreciating, or even simply being.

In his book, *Silence, Simplicity, and Solitude*, David A. Cooper explores mysticism. He says, *“Some people think there are only a handful of authentic mystics at any moment in time. This is not correct. Our everyday lives are filled with experiences that would be mystical...”*

Cooper lists examples of such everyday experiences: seeing a newborn infant, a tearful child, a playful pet, a drooping plant, a good friend in pain, or a blossoming tree, or the feelings that arise during our various encounters with others. When such experiences lead to moments of insight or inner knowing, they are mystical experiences... and we are mystics.

Cooper goes on to say, *“When our minds are busy, engaged, and constantly thinking, our perception becomes more intellectual, and much of the day passes without our really noticing what is going on.”*

As we cease to notice what is going on around us, we risk losing touch as well with inner perception. The spiritual path is to find ways to slow our busy mind – to slow our busy lives – so that we can enter into moments of reflection, or meditation, or prayer.

When we begin to slow our minds and minimize our thoughts, says Cooper, *“we begin to notice how much they shroud and constrict our inner perception. This helps us to gain even greater inner silence and then, interestingly, we begin to experience stimuli in a new*

*way: colors take on a fresh shimmer, sound becomes almost sensual, nature feels abundant and awesome.” (13)*

When was the last time you felt pure awe, unadulterated by a chattering mind? When did colors last take on a new shimmer? Or sound feel sensual?

Because electronic gadgetry allows us to step up the pace of our busyness, the temptation arises to keep increasing our speed. With all the tools for instant information and seemingly well-planned lives at our fingertips, we might do well to remember gathering *information* is different from attaining *inner knowledge and wisdom*. And filling our days with *busyness* is different from filling our lives with *meaning*. The spiritual challenge is to slow down.

We might do well to plug into our electronic calendars big blocks of time to turn off phones and computers and look deeply into our hearts and souls. While we're looking inside, we might take some time to increase our connection to the most high – the third area of spiritual growth I want to explore here. Call it Mystery, or the Spirit of Life, or God, or the source of love that moves through the world... Call it awe, or wonder, or comfort, or the promise of human connection and achievement. By my observation, one of the biggest spiritual challenges high tech presents in our times is that of seeing ourselves in the right perspective with regard to the larger truth of our existence.

When I was in seminary, I took a Buddhist meditation course. One day we had all settled into meditating when we heard someone's cell phone ring, followed by loud, hurried footsteps leaving the room. Later the student who took the phone call told us she had to answer the phone because it was her church and “they were in crisis.”

Now, churches are always in crisis, if you ask me. Or at least they could be if you let them be. If it isn't one thing, it's another, as Roseanne Roseannadonna used to always say. So, listening to my colleague explain her hasty dash from the room, I wondered which she loved more – Her church? Or the idea that they needed her so much that they couldn't wait until the end of her meditation class?

I think of it this way: My cell phone and email – where others can reach me constantly and often instantly – may serve to remind me of *who* I am – a minister, mother, wife, friend, sister, and so on. But if I am not careful, that ready accessibility to others could also make it easy for me to gain an exaggerated sense of my own importance. (Wow! All those phone calls, all those emails. I must be really important!)

So, for my spiritual health, I need to set aside time to remember *whose* I am. My spiritual journey – my life – is part of something bigger, so big I cannot even quantify it.

My cell phone and email are great tools, but they won't inspire the appropriate humility in me; that's something I need to tend to on my own. It's not about me, I need to remember. It's about the greater source of love and mercy and compassion. My spiritual journey is about opening my heart.

I am no Luddite, it should be clear. High tech is neither good nor bad; it's how we choose to incorporate it into our lives that matters. The spiritual journey will take us down roads to lead to deep relationships with others. The spiritual journey will lead us to our own hearts and souls. The spiritual journey will lead us beyond ourselves, to contemplate and connect with the source of love and mystery, and life, and awe.

The challenge is ours to take up. The gift is ours to embrace. The road to wisdom and inner truth is ours to follow.