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Remedy for Distraction

“They do it late at night, when their parents are asleep. They do it in restaurants and while crossing busy streets. They do it in the classroom with their hands behind their back[s]. They do it so much their thumbs hurt.”

“It” is texting, sending print messages by cellphone. And American teenagers send and as many as hundreds of messages each day – one every few minutes.

“The phenomenon,” writes journalist Katie Hafner, “is beginning to worry physicians and psychologists, who say it is leading to anxiety, distraction in school, failing grades, repetitive stress injury, and sleep deprivation,” answering texts late into the night.¹

I'm interested in the largest implications of this texting “culture,” which point directly to a shift in the development of independence and freedom. Psychologist Sherry Turkel, director of the Initiative on Technology and Self at M.I.T., says, “Among the jobs of adolescence are to separate from your parents, and to find the peace and quiet to become the person you decide to be. Texting hits directly at both these jobs.... [N]ow you have adolescents who are texting their mothers fifteen times a day, asking things like, 'Should I get the red shoes or the blue shoes?'.... [And] If you're being deluged by constant communication, the pressure to answer immediately is quite high. So if you're in the middle of a thought, forget it.... If something next to you is vibrating every couple of minutes, it makes it very difficult to be [peaceful].”

Teenagers are very much driven by what's going on in their peer group, and exhibit tremendous anxiety when they feel out of the loop. The good news about texting is that it provides a kind of companionship and connectedness. But is that the kind of companionship and connectedness we want for them? How about for ourselves?

¹ Information and quotations on adolescence and texting is from Katie Hafner, “Texting May Be Taking a Toll,” *New York Times*, 26 May, 2009. Thanks to Kem Morehead for research assistance!

I do it. I haven't figured out how to do it like the kids do it, with the phone in their backpacks or under their coats or desks or behind their backs. And I know not to do it driving. But the same allure that draws in the teenagers speaks to me: companionship and connectedness. It's also a great break in the action... only it turns out it's a way bigger break than we might imagine.

Texting is an interruption, and a ringing cell phone is an even bigger distraction. The *Los Angeles Times* recently reported that the ring – in a classroom, a worship service, a movie or play, or anyplace people are concentrating “isn't merely an annoyance.... Wash U researcher Jill Shelton, posing as a student, allowed her phone to ring for thirty seconds during a college psychology lecture, to gauge the impact of the distraction on [those] around her. When tested on material that had been presented in the class, the students who had been interrupted by a ring tone scored twenty-five percent worse than the students who had been able to concentrate on the lecture.”² And by the way, the worst ringtones for a lasting effect were the ones that play popular songs. I won't start singing to you now to illustrate this point, but you know what I mean when I say they just get stuck in your head.

Recently, one of my beloved colleagues was preaching to the Mass. Bay District of the Unitarian Universalist Ministers Association. You know where I'm going with this; I don't even have to tell you that at the heart of his sermon, his cell phone started going off in his pocket. I kind of picture John with his cellphone going off – and somehow it's always someone from Transylvania or the Philippines – but this really brought down the house. To make matters worse, we were coaching him from the congregation: John, it's *your* phone. John, it's in your jacket pocket. John, push the little button on the side. I can attest that I, for one, have no recollection of his sermon, but I can sing you his ring tone.

There's no sign that the texting and other cell phone disruptions are going to stop anytime soon. The distraction feels addictive; as a society, we're desperate for a break in the action, some kind of time-out from the headlong rush, and the “fix” of a real person interacting with us – sort of. I agree with what Dr. Sherry Turkel meant about the importance of finding peace and quiet, but I suspect that texting is about as peaceful and quiet an activity as many of us – young people and adults alike – are experiencing right now. Suggesting that we toss out the phones is Luddite; used appropriately, their deficits

2 as quoted in *The Week*, 19 June, 2009, p. 24

are far outweighed by their benefits. So what's the remedy?

One of my colleagues takes a modern-day sabbath, shutting down her electronics every Saturday. She doesn't serve a congregation, so she feels less compelled to be reachable than many of us, but, she says, “You know where I live. If you need me, come get me.” The idea of letting an entire day's e-mail pile up in my inbox is enough to dissuade me from this, but I'm intrigued by a less draconian version of it. What would you do if your phone, television, computer, and iPod were off-limits, even for an hour?

If the first thing that comes to mind is “go to a movie,” let's go deeper. If teenagers need peace and quiet to become the people they decide to be, I suspect adults need peace and quiet to be the people we've decided to be. I'm thinking of the opening of Stanley Kunitz's poem, *The Layers*:

I have walked through many lives,
some of them my own,
and I am not who I was,
though some principle of being
abides, from which I struggle
not to stray.

Who among us doesn't stray from that “principle of being?” We just sang it – words of a poem attributed to Rumi – minus one important line.

Come, come, whoever you are,
Wanderer, worshipper, lover of leaving
Though you've broken your vows a thousand times
Ours is no caravan of despair
Come, yet again, come

I also found a translation – allegedly a “direct” translation – that substitutes “wanderer, worshipper, lover of leaving” with “Even if you are an unbeliever or a Magician or an idol worshipper....!”³ So there. Call us whatever names you like, we all lose our way, walking through our many lives, and we break our vows, our promises, both to others and to ourselves. The big heart of our Universalist heritage calls us to forgive ourselves and begin again in love.

That points us to another Rumi poem, one of my very favorites. It says, in part,

3 qa.sunnipath.com/issue_view.asp?id=11915

Today like every other day we wake up empty and frightened.
 Don't open the door to the study and begin reading.
 Take down a musical instrument.
 Let the beauty we love be what we do.
 There are hundreds of ways to kneel and kiss the ground.

And now, a break for station identification and a word from our sponsor. Arlington Street Church: Gathered in love and service for justice and ... peace. Worship: the personal technology is off. Here is so much of that for which we long: peace and quiet, companionship and connectedness, deep listening. One hour a week for our souls! And the restorative quality of this hour – this sanctuary, in the best sense of that word – can be extraordinary. How wonderful to give this to ourselves, and give ourselves to it.

If you have more than an hour a week for your soul, I commend you to take it, and grow with it. One of my favorite authors, environmental activist Terry Tempest Williams, wrote this after time in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge in Alaska.

“This is what I have learned in these short weeks in the refuge:

...Choose one's traveling companions well. Physical strength and prudence are necessary. Imagination and ingenuity are our finest traits.

Expect anything.

You can change your mind like the weather.

Patience is more powerful than anger. Humor is more attractive than fear.

Pay attention. Listen. We are most alive when discovering.

Humility is the capacity to see.

Suffering comes, we do not have to create it.

We are meant to live simply.

We are meant to be joyful.

Life continues with and without us.

Beauty is another word for God.⁴

My spiritual companions, I leave you for the summer with these thoughts. Peace and quiet and companionship and connectedness are not mutually exclusive. They are available to us here, and in the wild, and everywhere we remember to remedy our distraction by seeking that sacred place where our principle of being abides.

4 Terry Tempest Williams, “Ground Truthing,” *Orion Magazine*, May/June 2003, see orionmagazine.org/index.php/articles/article/141/

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Take peace!