

TECHNOLOGY AND THE SPIRIT

A Four Part Sermon

by Rev. Kathleen Hepler and Rev. Michelle LaGrave

First Parish in Framingham Unitarian Universalist

May 23, 2010

READINGS

One can... “speak of the God of Technology in the sense that people believe technology works, they rely on it, it makes promises, they are bereft when denied access to it, they are delighted when they are in its presence, for most people it works in mysterious ways, they condemn people who speak against it, they stand in awe of it, they are ostracized if they choose not to use it, and, in the born again mode, they will alter their lifestyles, their schedules, their habits, and their relationships to accommodate it. If this be not a form of religious belief, what is?”¹

“Spirituality is an experience of depth in life. It is not religion or faith, although it can be a part of it. Being spiritual is acknowledging something greater than oneself, and knowing that it is in the harmonic resonance with all things... and that all things are as they should be when we recognize this unity.”²

PART I

Rev. Kathleen Hepler

Bill Gates met God, and God said, “Well, Bill, I’m really confused on this one. I’m not sure whether to send you to Heaven or Hell. After all, you enormously helped society by putting a computer in almost every home in the world, and yet you created that ghastly Windows. I’m going to do something I’ve never done before. I’m going to let you decide where you want to go.”

Bill Gates said, “What’s the difference between the two?” God said, “It might help you decide if you took a peek at both places. Shall we look at Hell first?”

Bill was amazed. He saw a clean, white sandy beach with clear waters. There were thousands of beautiful men and women running around, playing in the water, laughing and frolicking about. The sun was shining and the temperature was perfect. “This is great!” said Bill. “If this is Hell, I can’t wait to see Heaven.” God said, “Let’s go!” and off they went to Heaven. Bill saw puffy white clouds in a beautiful blue sky, with angels drifting about playing harps and singing. It was nice, but surely not as enticing as Hell. Bill thought for only a brief moment and rendered his decision.

“God, I do believe I would prefer to go to Hell.” “As you wish,” said God.

¹ Postman, N. *The End of Education: Redefining the Value of School*. Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1995.

² Rolland Smith, *Kosmos*, May 2007, p. 17.

Two weeks later, God decided to check up on the late billionaire to see how things were going. He found Bill shackled to a wall, screaming amidst the hot flames in a dark cave. He was being tortured by demons with pitchforks. “How ya doin’ Bill?” asked God. Bill responded with anguish and despair. “This is awful! This is not what I expected at all! What happened to the beach and the beautiful people playing in the water?” “Oh that,” said God. “That was the screen saver.”

We explore today the role of technology in our spiritual lives wondering about the paths to glory it can be, and the hellish nightmares it can create as well. And, we, as a multi-generational congregation are challenged to stay open to the wisdom of the various generations about this huge phenomenon in our lives.

Well, listen, I am a baby boomer who came into adulthood sitting in circles and talking politics, sitting in circles and having spiritual experiences, marching shoulder to shoulder with others against the war in Vietnam... pawning my state-of-the-art electric typewriter to fund a trip to Washington to do so! I came of age sitting in circles and becoming empowered as a woman. My adult life has created the experience and the resultant belief that the best experience with people is, well, “enfleshed”. It is something I highly value. It is something that we give up if we increasingly rely on technology to communicate. I believe that we need one another in bodily form to remember who we are most centrally, most dearly.

But, then, too, there are individual differences that inform how we feel about the place of technology in our lives. I am an ENFP on the Myers Briggs. Intuition and feeling is important to me and it is connected to the vibes in a room, not words on a screen where I trust myself hardly at all to pick up vibes. I am a gestalt person who wants to be in the experience in order to understand it. I am an extrovert who gets energized with people whose beating hearts are actually in the same space with me...not just imagined.

And I grew up in a time before computers. My child-brain developed its circuitry in a wholly different way than my children’s. People my age and above will take longer to pick up new technology not necessarily because we don’t want to, or because we are old, but because we are having to re-train our brains at the same time. We know that increasing use of communication technology is changing the structure of our brains.

Now then, too, listen to this. Almost all of my life, corporate prayer was corporal prayer. We pray together when we are together. As my spiritual life has evolved, I have a belief that the divine spirit of love is most accessible when two or more are gathered...gathered bodily.

I have sometimes looked at technology as something that is robbing us of some basic humanity and creating more loneliness rather than less.

On the other hand, I am a liberal religionist. My UU faith calls me to embrace the ongoing revelation of truth, to leap away from the safe known as a spiritual practice.

And, I am a busy person, and I love all of the ways that technology can streamline things...except when it doesn’t.

And, we hear that we adapt as a religious movement to the new technologies or we die and I believe this to be true in this modern era. If all people younger than the boomers live a significant on-line life, then we had better, at the very least, learn about it, before we just sigh and throw up our hands. Besides every young person I know in this congregation is terrific. Why would I not trust their choices and allow them to teach me and to influence me?

So, it is an adventure for me to consider the possibility that individual and collective spiritual lives of people can be enhanced through technology. Michelle is much more of a true believer in this arena, but I respect her and I am a liberal. I am open to hearing new things, and then filtering them through my own being to make my choices.

This is the adventure set before us in modern times.

(Michelle calls me on her cell phone and corrects me by saying that it is really the “post-modern” era. I am incredulous that she has called during the sermon and say to the congregation, “This is not what we mean when we say ‘put your cell phone in worship mode.’”)

So what uses of technology promote spiritual experiences and ethical living...and what uses do not? How does technology serve the transformation of people toward wholeness and the connection between people as participants in a large web of creation that is calling us to know ourselves as one? What do we give up and what do we gain with increasing use of technology? What is heavenly about it and what is hell disguised as a beautiful beach? And how will we recognize one from the other? And what are the mind-bending and efficient and delightful ways that the collective consciousness can increasingly develop toward love and justice and unity because of all of the technology we have and will have?

PART II

Rev. Michelle LaGrave

I’ve spent the last few weeks on a wild, wonderful, and wacky romp through the world of cyberspace, phone apps, downloads, streaming videos, electronic chalices, and MP3 players. My Quest? To prove true my conviction that technology, when used intentionally, can enrich our spiritual lives. It’s been a journey at times frustrating, occasionally joyful, sometimes empty and flat, even painful. I’ve felt skepticism, disbelief, and anger. I’ve also felt intimately connected and deeply nourished. Yes, intimately connected and deeply nourished. I’ve discovered that intention is the key word. Technology, when used intentionally, can enrich our spiritual lives.

I’d like to share a bit of what I’ve discovered with you now. As it turns out, there are apps for everything. Buddhists can tailor meditations to individual breathing rates. Taoists can read the entire Tao Te Ching. Catholics can read the prayers and remind themselves of the seven deadly sins or any other basic tenet of the catechism. Jews can count the Omer, convert dates, check candle-lighting times, and read prayers in Hebrew. Sufis can read quotes from Rumi, much like we did for the Call to Worship earlier in the service today. All right on your phone – instant access to religion and spirituality. One of the most interesting apps, though, was put out by the Seventh Day Adventists. With a simple push of a finger, one can read the daily lesson from the Sabbath School Quarterly. The lesson from a couple of days ago was on “The Atmosphere of Heaven”, complete with scripture references and places to type in notes for later use during Sabbath school.

Although I've found much inspiration for my daily life in the poetry of Rumi; my favorite app eventually turned out to be an automatic alarm for the five daily prayers of a Muslim. A compass showed me in which direction to pray, no matter my change in location, and a quiet buzz sounded at the appointed times. At first, I mostly noticed the difference in the timing and rhythm of the day. I usually missed the first call to prayer as it happened when I was sound asleep, around four in the morning. And the last prayer of the day happened well before I went to bed. Sometimes I stopped to say my own prayer, but mostly I noticed how inconvenient I felt the timing to be and found it disruptive to whatever I was trying to accomplish. My experience, at first, was interesting but also fairly empty.

Then, I discovered that I could set the app to actually play the prayers aloud. Ahh, such a difference. After just a few days, my experience has shifted. When the prayers sound, I may be just as busy as I was before, but now something inside me stills even when my body continues to act. It's an internal pause. I find myself thinking of those many, many unknown people who are stopping, right now, to pray and I feel connected to them. I recognize the holiness of the moment and it restores my soul.

Similarly, a romp through cyberspace was just as telling. I explored the Church of the Larger Fellowship website, a cyber-community of UUUs in what one might call the diaspora. I learned that one can conduct an annual meeting via conference call, hold religious education classes online, set up a lending library, even light an electronic chalice – an experience, I admit, I found less than fulfilling. I also revisited beliefnet.com and re-took the Belief-O-Matic quiz, discovering that with the ending of my seminary years, I can no longer fit my theology into the canned answers of a multiple choice quiz. To most questions, I answered “none of the above”; an experience which will fuel many theological reflections over the upcoming summer months.

Much more than with either my phone or my computer, I discovered my most nourishing spiritual practices come with the use of my MP3 player. I love to play music by Olympia's Daughters, Sweet Honey n the Rock, and the Blind Boys of Alabama. I sing along to hymns while riding in my car. I've even discovered I can download songs in Hebrew; an effective double-duty of spiritual practice and theological study. Whenever I find myself in a bit of a down mood, I play the 23rd Psalm in Hebrew or one of many versions of the Sh'ma. They never fail to restore my soul. And so, with the ending of my journey, I have found my initial proposition to be sound. Technology can and does enrich my spiritual life.

Part III

Rev. Kathleen Hepler

It would be great to have a First Parish “app” and once a day have a reminder on our phones to pause and breathe and think of one another! I am convinced after these past few weeks that for individual practice and for personal spiritual exploration the internet, our cell phones, etc. have much to offer. I have a gadget that I hook up to my finger that gives me feedback about how calm my physical being is. When I am not in the green zone, I can breathe quietly and bring myself back to a meditative state. A daily Rumi poem, or a daily poem in general ...all good.

These are individual pursuits.... Necessary in the growth of our spirits and often neglected part of a person's day.

In the more social, community building areas, what ought we consider? Certainly communication is faster with e-mail. We need be mindful that not everyone in our congregation has a computer or wants to have one. And, we need to remember that not everyone in the world can afford a computer and, so there is a possibility that the already disempowered poor will fall farther out of the loop.

I am sure that Face Book is great. Yet, how do we continue to honor private space and time; those times when we are not inputting things into our brains? There is so much wisdom that can only arrive in the fallow times, the relaxed times, the hammock- swinging times when we are not interrupted by all manner of ring tones, instant messages and the words “you’ve got mail”. Those moments when we can drop down from our heads into our whole beings and relax into the now, remembering that we are more than our thoughts.

I also think that trying to resolve conflict without being in the same room with those who we have the conflict with, can be dicey indeed. Without voice inflection or body language, words are far more likely to be misconstrued. Anger and easy button pushing are not good companions. In a world where so much objectifying of human beings goes on, virtual emotions seem to raise false courage and speed up responses that are not coming from our best selves.

And, how do we grapple with the whole new arena of cyber bullying and the ways that the internet can manipulate the unaware into dangerous situations?

And, I don’t think it makes me a fuddy-duddy to say that the authenticity and love that happens between people and that sustains us in our lives, is better developed in real time with real people. I saw a documentary on a virtual orchestra. People from all parts of the world, recorded their piece of a symphony and sent them to the conductor who put them all together. Well, it was beautiful in a perfect kind of way, for all human error had been edited out. And it was a moving thought that people who normally would never play together, could. At the same time, the idea that all mistakes could be edited and that no two people were ever together to make the music or partake of it...well, it just isn’t the same.

On the other hand, I heard the great environmental activist Bill McKibben on NPR a few weeks ago, saying that in the near future when fossil fuels will be much more limited, we will be able to stay connected to one another virtually, and we will be very grateful to do so.

And, we are finding out that technology makes it harder for tyranny to be hidden. Cell phone cameras and small video cams are bringing us awareness of situations in the world that it might be easier to hide otherwise. There is a whole new world of digital social activism.

I am excited about how we can stay connected with people in our congregation who cannot make it here on Sunday. Homebound people can actually “sit in a pew” on Sunday morning in an interactive way. And, all of the college students who are members could be here too!

I believe churches are one of the few places left where we intentionally seek to balance the loneliness that is so prevalent in the world. It will be hard to convince me that virtual worship will ever cause the spirit to move like it does each and every Sunday here live, in real time. I imagine I will be a holdout for this because I am just set in my

ways! The hugs, the voices raised in song, the embodied silence, the shared laughter, the salty tears. It's an energetic that is irreplaceable.

We just need to keep asking the question, "how can technology serve us?", rather than getting caught up in so much technological maintenance that we are serving it, bowing to its eccentricities and demands, allowing it to rule our time, and beginning to believe that there is no mystery anymore. We just need to keep asking the question, "Where is the spirit of love and justice best known? Where is God in all of this?"

A BOOMING VOICE FROM THE BALCONY SAYS, "JUST GOOGLE ME, KATHLEEN. JUST GOOGLE ME."

PART IV

Rev. Michelle LaGrave

I did Google God. And, yes, God was there, just as "s/he" promised Kathleen. In - only about 474 million results. 474 million. Hmm, I can't help but wonder: If the traditionally constructed definition of God were correct, shouldn't those results be, well... infinite?

In any case, infinite or not, God is on Google. The top result for God is, not surprisingly, I suppose, Wikipedia. Other top results argue for or against the existence of God; each purporting to have scientific or other rational proofs for their own side of the argument. Others suggest they can answer all my questions about God. My favorite result, though, tells me that God is on Twitter and I can email God's very own self at god@omnipotent.com.

Since I declined an invitation to chat live with a Mormon on www.Mormon.org; our question remains. Where are you, God, really? Where are you? As Unitarian Universalists, we affirm the interdependent web of existence; suggesting that for those of us who see God, God can be found in the web. I can accept that as a working hypothesis; but on the Web? ON the WEB? Now this begins to stretch my theology. Suddenly, I find myself on the edges of my theological comfort zone.

The truth is I consider myself to be something of a panentheist and a process theologian. If God is in all and God is more than all; if God lives and grows, changes and develops over time; if God co-creates with us, serving as the source of human inspiration; why not? Why wouldn't God be found in the depths of technology; in the inner workings of megabytes and hard drives? And why am I so resistant to the idea? To this, I have no clear answers. Perhaps, they will emerge for me with time.

In the meanwhile, though, I wonder. I wonder if people experience God in the process of creating technology. I know I have experienced God in the process of creating art and music and in writing sermons; so why not in technology? And, if God is present in the process of creation, is God also present in the end result? What does it mean to create? Can any one soul completely separate from the interdependent web to the point of being able to claim sole responsibility for any act of creation? Is any act of creation uniquely our own?

In asking: Where are you, God? Many, many more questions emerge than answers. I imagine God to be present whenever any two or more people engage together on matters of faith and spirituality, even when through the media

of technology. I imagine God to be present in any creative process, even in the creation of technology. What I am certain of, is that I can experience God while using technology. I know that these past experiences have nourished my soul. And, I know that I will continue to seek them out.

PART V

TECHNO-COVENANT

Rev Michelle LaGrave and Rev Kathleen Hepler

Introduction: Michelle and Kathleen have agreed to make a covenant with ourselves and each other about our intentional use of technology. We'd like to share it with you now...

- We will remember that technology exists to serve our needs and we do not exist to serve technology.
- We will respond to the various notifications, alarms, beeps, and rings which are continually emitted from our cell phones in a conscientious and intentional way, avoiding compulsive responses and perpetual availability.
- We will seek out ways to enrich ourselves and the lives of others with the use of technology.
- We will use technology with an eye to efficiency and productivity so that we might increase the amount of time we can share with our family and friends.
- We will use technology to deepen our spiritual lives through meaningful music, meditation, and study.
- We will use technology to connect with whom we might otherwise remain out of contact.
- We will remember technology can be fun and use it for enjoyment with our family and friends.
- We will use technology to deepen our connections with other humans and improve our relationships, never in an effort to cut off or distance ourselves from others.
- We will work to resolve conflicts face to face whenever possible.
- We will not use email or text messages to argue with someone.
- We will consider the ethical aspects of our technological consumption. Before purchasing new services or equipment, we will ask the following questions:

Is the company ethical in the way it does business? Are workers treated well? Are GLBTQ rights upheld? Are environmentally-friendly manufacturing processes used?

Would our new purchase add unnecessarily to the landfill? Is there a way to reuse or recycle our old equipment? Will we be able to do the same for our new purchase in the future?

How necessary is this purchase? Can we really afford it?

Will this new purchase enrich our personal or spiritual lives? Will it make our work lives more efficient or productive?

- We promise to continually reflect upon our use of technology and the ways in which it impacts ourselves, other people, and the earth.

This is our covenant. So may it be.