

Days of Miracle and Wonder

Delivered to the First Unitarian Church of Wilmington Delaware

October 7, 2012

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I don't really remember why I felt like picking an argument with my grandmother; I guess I was just bored that day. Or perhaps for some reason I was feeling a bit defensive. I was about twelve when I declared to my grandmother that things were better now than they were when she was young. This was the mid-eighties when I made this grand proclamation. I don't recall exactly which period of time I had in mind to compare it to, but I think I was referring to the Great Depression. That would have been about the time that she would have been the age I was. I suppose I came to this conclusion after hearing all of her stories about growing up during those difficult days. Meanwhile we were in the midst of the go-go eighties which seemed to be a whole world away from Depression-era scarcity. Surely, I thought, now must be better than then.

Now my grandmother Molly was the sweetest person I have ever known bar none. Looking back at this conversation, I realize that she had the perfect answer. She simply refused to engage in my petty

arguing. She wouldn't play along. She didn't concede my point; she simply said that it wasn't a matter of times being better or worse than before, just different. I tried to press the point, but at this stage of the conversation I felt like I was becoming an obnoxious brat. So after awhile of not really getting anywhere, I let it go—fully convinced that times were better now than they were in her day.

What is funny to me now about this argument, or non-argument, is that it took place 25 years ago. This was long before the days of the internet, email, the world wide web, or cell phones. Computers were around back then but they were big, clunky and expensive. This past Monday marked the 30th anniversary of the compact disc. When I was having this argument with my grandmother, CDs seemed exotic and futuristic. And social media? Forget it. Facebook, Twitter, Yelp, Foursquare, or even Google were utterly inconceivable in that moment when I was trying to convince my grandmother that now was better than then.

This past summer I bought an Android tablet to help with taking notes in meetings and to make reading books on Kindle more convenient. Ever since last year when I had to lug a satchel full of books onto an airplane, I have become a huge fan of Kindle. But these new tablets integrate my meeting notes, my calendar, my email, and just about everything else right into a notebook sized square. It is as if I had my own little personal office assistant right there with me all of the time.

One day, about two weeks after I bought it, I was driving into the office, got about three blocks from home, and realized I had left the tablet computer at home. What did I do? I turned around, drove home, grabbed it and headed back out. It was while I was back on the road that it hit me: I am now dependent on this thing! It has been in my life only a few weeks, and already I can't do without it. One more piece of "must have" technology that means Skynet will have its hooks into me all the more when the robot apocalypse comes.

But I am sure I am not alone out there. Many of us have adopted modern technology to one degree or another. Guessing by the number of inquiries we get for people to access the wifi network here at church, more and more of us are getting into new forms of technology at an increasing rate. Every once and awhile when I see or hear of something new coming out, I am reminded of that conversation I had with my grandmother about whether or not we are better off now than we were in her day. What would she think of cell phones? Of Twitter? Of my need to run home because I might have to face a day at the office without my must-have two-week old Android tablet?

The first time I ever owned my own computer was when I was doing my internship in North Carolina in 1998. It was really the first time that I had unlimited access to the internet. Of course it was great—it was my new toy. I would go to chat rooms, forums about my favorite TV shows, and all kinds of things. Before I knew it I was on the internet

longer and longer each night. I would come home from church intending to read a book or call home, and I find myself engrossed in this online reality. Hours would go by and I wouldn't even know it. Like any addiction I was powerless to stop this. Pretty soon it was just sucking up my entire life outside of work. Fortunately, by the end of the year the internet started to lose some of its power over me. I was able to resist more and more. But by then it was a normal part of life, as integral to my existence as owning a telephone. A year later I received a video game system for Christmas, and was similarly addicted for about a week and half. When it came time to go back to school in Chicago I knew I was going to have to get serious about writing my doctoral thesis. The video games stayed in Michigan.

What is it about technology that brings this out in us? At first it is a bright shiny toy that we can't get enough of, and then after six months or so it is ubiquitous that we take it for granted. In one sense things like Facebook, Skype, and YouTube make us feel much more closely connected. Political movements such as Occupy Wall Street and the Arab Spring would not have been possible without that sense that that the world is a smaller place than it was before. Right now I have a better awareness of what is going on in the lives of the people in Omaha and the people I went to High School with than I ever have. But in another sense this feels very disconnecting. What do I really know about the people I went to High School with and what they are doing now?

Mostly I know how they vote and which sports teams they root for! We don't have the intimate, face to face relationship we all once did when we all went to the same school day after day. Unfortunately for some people online relationships start to take the place of person to person relationships. While online there exists the possibility for an astounding amount of breadth of interpersonal connection, there isn't much room for depth of connection. You can be connected on Twitter to any politician or celebrity you want to. That doesn't mean you actually know them any better than you did—simply that you are their “fan” or their “friend” and therefore part of a voluntary audience.

This is surely impressive. But are we better off? We are more dependent on cooler stuff that is for sure, but is that better? Well, as my grandmother said, it is hard to say if it is better or worse, just different. We have some amazing technology in our lives that we utterly take for granted, and while it has made life much more convenient, it has also created whole new problems that my grandmother could never have encountered. Have you ever had someone try to convey sarcasm to you in an email? Or perhaps sent or received an email in all caps, which is YELLING?! These things have caused me, and just about everyone on email, all kinds of trouble. What we have discovered is that so much human communication takes place through body language, voice inflection, and other non-verbal cues that when you are just reading disembodied text you lose a good piece of what is trying to be conveyed.

And this is why the internet can feel isolating and disconnecting even while if we have hundreds of Twitter followers. In the stories my grandmother told about the Great Depression, most of them were about people, neighbors usually, helping each other out. Everyone was poor or out of work at the time. They had an experience of shared suffering that brought them together and made them feel like a community. It had to; it was the only way to survive at the time. Most social psychologists have noticed that the people who report having the most amount of happiness in their lives don't come from the richest countries in the world. Affluence does not equal happiness.

Now I am not going to go in the other direction and wax sentimental about how wonderful the Great Depression was either. It wasn't better or worse, just different. But I dare say this, as someone who did not live during that time of course, that it seems that back then there was a greater appreciation for what they had. We have amazing pieces of technology at our disposal which help us a great deal or cause us new forms of suffering, but most of the time we simply take it for granted. How long are those lines for the new iPhone? Is the fifth version really all that better than the fourth? These days it takes something truly amazing to make us pause and wonder about our world. The Mars landing last summer did that—where we all stopped for a moment and considered our place in the universe. Perhaps the moment of greatest wonder in our national history was when the late Neil

Armstrong walked on the moon. But it takes something that dramatic, though, to wake us up out of our technological addiction.

One of my favorite comedians is Louis C.K.. There is a line from one of his comedy routines that tempted me to change the title of this sermon. He says, “Everything is amazing, and nobody is happy!” Take for example our smart phones. These are amazing inventions. They are more powerful than the computer they had on board the rocket that traveled to the moon. Have you ever fired up your phone only to find that it is slow or can’t connect very well to the network? C.K. once saw someone doing, what I often do in such a case, which is yelling and cursing at the darn thing to work. He counsels give it a second. It has to send a signal all the way to outer space and back; can you give it a second to go to outer space?

Louis C.K. tells the story of getting on an airplane recently. They get up into the sky and the captain announces a new feature of the airline—they have free wifi on the plane. This particular flight was the first time this was available. Sure enough he was getting out his laptop, looking up YouTube clips, checking email. It was great. About half an hour later, however, the wifi goes down. The guy sitting next to him mutters in disgust, “What a rip off! Piece of junk.” How quickly a sense of entitlement sets in?! This fellow had never even known it was possible to access the internet on an airplane until thirty minutes before, and already he takes it for granted; already he feels that he is owed this

convenience and suffers as a result of it not being available. All in the span of half an hour! To which Louis C.K. comments, “Take a look around you. You are sitting in a chair in the sky. That is amazing. We will be in LA from New York in five hours.” Human flight is amazing, yet all we ever do, it seems, is complain about its inconvenience. Nobody is happy.

Neil Armstrong, the first man to walk on the moon, lived a pretty amazing life. People would always ask him, “What was it like to walk on the moon.” He had a pretty interesting response. He would talk about how it really wasn’t just him who walked on the moon. It took 400,000 of the world’s smartest scientists and engineers to get him and his crew up there. It took the world’s smartest seamstresses who figured out how to make a space suit that would be able to withstand the dramatic change in external temperature that they would experience on the moon’s surface. Here is a fellow who, if anyone has a right to brag about a personal accomplishment and seeing something spectacular it’s Neill Armstrong, and yet he didn’t take that experience for granted. He understood the many interdependent factors and conditions that all came together so that he and Buzz Aldrin could do this incredible thing. It’s really the opposite attitude of the fellow who assumes he is entitled to free wifi on an airplane.

That I think is the lesson for us. Experience life directly, just as it is. Like looking at the rings of Saturn through a telescope, savor the

moment in all of its richness un-mediated and un-interpreted by others. For it is when we are able to do that, that we begin to see how we are all connected. We are all experiencing this thing called life together, and in that sense we are one. And that can never be an isolating experience. We can use our technology to go deeper in that moment, feel greater connection to each other. It is possible, but it takes intentionality. It takes a willingness to slow down and appreciate what is given, what is right before us. When we do that, then every moment has the possibility of being a moment of wonder, regardless of whether we are seeing the rings of Saturn for the first time, walking on the moon, or waiting for that stupid iPhone to connect to the network. Give it a second. Give all of those experiences, a second.

I think back to that almost argument I had with my grandmother. There were fewer temptations in her time, and even in the days when we had that conversation, to distract us away from the present moment. There were fewer technological rabbit-holes to fall into. Now we can so easily get lost online, or in video games, or some other faux-reality that we become satisfied with a large number of superficial relationships. Let us drink from the waters of technological interconnectivity in moderation. It has wonderful gifts that can enhance our life, but so too does it contain the possibility for new forms of suffering. May we not forget the importance of depth, both in the present moment, but also in another person. There really isn't any substitute for simply being in

each other's presence. The greatest source of wonder and amazement is the person sitting next to you. No one has ever invented anything so curious, so wonderful, so enigmatic, and yet so fantastic as another human being. May we have the patience to explore that richness. Amen
Blessed Be.