

“The Interrupted and Distracted Mind” by David Novello

June 30, 2019



The Third Sunday after Pentecost

In today's Epistle reading, Paul tells the Galatians that they are called to freedom. He instructs them to stand firm and not use their freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence. He warns not to submit again to a yoke of slavery. Paul wrote concerning desires of the flesh, which he said were opposed to the Spirit. I know these are controversial passages, with debate over what exactly the Greek word "sarx", commonly translated into English as "the flesh", truly means.

I won't touch on this debate, but rather will address a newer type of self-indulgence that makes many of us slaves – a self-indulgence of the mind. It is hardly a new subject. I am talking about the temptation not to stand firm against the ever-increasing seductions of technology, and in particular technology that lures us into easy gratification at the expense of our spiritual and emotional lives. Spiritual and emotional lives that long for, and need, quiet, concentration, and freedom from interruption and distraction.

I'm sure you know what I mean – the enticements of activities like Internet browsing, social media following and posting, and rapidly responding to emails, text messages, and notifications as they bombard us more frequently each year. Enticements that often lead to addiction. The addiction risk has increased enormously in the mere twelve years since the release of the first smartphone. It is not surprising that there are 12-step programs for addiction to technology.

Only eleven days ago I heard a line, written in Japan 800 years ago, that resonates for me. It was said concerning thoughts preventing us from being quiet and seeing clearly and spaciouly. Here it is: "To reveal the sky, don't cover it up." It sounds very simple. We are blessed with a beautiful, expansive, illuminated sky, and all we need to do is not obstruct it. So simple in concept, and yet probably the most difficult task for the human mind. Our minds – at least what we might think of as our "head minds" as contrasted with our "body minds" – of course are always churning out distracting thoughts, regardless of whether we are sitting still or engaged in activity. That has been true since the beginning of consciousness. Growing complexity and material well-being in the world, with its many benefits, have multiplied the various siren songs calling us away from ourselves.

The "Age of Acceleration" of recent decades has us running from one thing to another, and has reduced the amount of open, quiet time we experience. We collect more data – and I have to say I like gathering and sifting through information very much – but it comes at a serious cost if we constantly interrupt ourselves to do so. I clearly remember when, eleven or twelve years ago, several of us in my book group were wondering about a fact. The early adopter among us said, "Let's check," pulled out his iPhone, and had the answer within a minute or two. That was so amazing; the world had changed in a very significant way. Now it's not unusual to see one, two, or maybe even three men in the group – and I'm not excluding

myself here – on their phones, checking something or other, as the others converse. Not a good thing.

For sure there are many good things about being more closely connected through the electronic world. A special one for me was the creation of a WhatsApp group, with Marcia, our children, and their significant others. It makes it easy to share what is happening in our lives, through words and photos, and it helps bridge the physical distance. But the constant ping of incoming messages was driving me crazy until our son showed me how I could cancel sound and vibration notifications when a message arrives. As he told the others, “He muted us.” This helps me to postpone looking at the messages, thus distracting me less throughout the day. Still, a red circle on my phone tells me there are new messages inside the app. It’s a devil prodding me with his trident to take a look now, and not wait. Sometimes I resist, sometimes I don’t. It is difficult. And with other messages – for example, from a teacher saying a class will be delayed by 15 minutes – I do need to know right away. So I get binged and interrupted by those ones.

It was interesting to watch the distractions arise – and to see myself often succumb to them – as I wrote this sermon. A number of them would have been very difficult to avoid; quick responses to texts or emails were required, whereas 25 years ago we usually did fine without immediate responses to letters or even faxes. I think millennials have it worse than people my age because they have grown up in the smartphone era, and delayed replies often are outside of norms.

I confess that I can’t even try to blame societal norms for allowing myself to be tugged away on a number of other occasions. In some ways, these types of disruptions are nothing new. Before the invention of personal computers, when avoiding sitting down to write a paper or memo, I would find various things to do that did not need to be attended to at that moment. But it is very different now. There are many more

ways to be pulled away from what we are engaged in. The temptations abound. Short-term gratification can be found so simply on the computer or the smartphone. It is so much easier to take multiple detours before we finish something, or – perhaps more disturbing – as we endeavor to do nothing. That is, as we seek to rest in the spaciousness and depth of quiet and unhurried time that we need, covering up the sky less than normal, and perhaps being able to hear a still small voice.

The other day I thought about Jesus on his 40-day fast in the desert, resisting the devil's temptations. He was in a vast contemplative space that allowed him to empty himself. One can see this self-emptying, this kenosis, as not covering up the sky, or perhaps as allowing the covers to fall away. But what would it have been like if Jesus had taken a smartphone with him? What would it have been like to try to resist those additional temptations, ones of the devil of distraction? Could he have emptied himself if the stillness were broken by text messages coming in every 15 minutes, even if he had silenced his phone so it would only vibrate? Or even if he turned it off and checked for messages and emails only once or twice a day? It would not have been easy.

I have recently read the better part of two interesting, short books by Byung-Chul Han, who was born in South Korea but moved to Germany to study and teach philosophy. In *The Burnout Society*, he writes that multitasking, video games, and the like “produce a broad but flat mode of attention.” He describes the pitfalls of this mode in terms of culture, but I think they apply equally to the life of the Spirit. Here is what he says:

“We owe the cultural achievements of humanity...to deep, contemplative attention. Culture presumes an environment in which deep attention is possible. Increasingly, such immersive reflection is being displaced by an entirely different form of attention: hyperattention. A rash change of focus between different tasks, sources of information, and processes

characterizes this scattered mode of awareness. Since it also has a low tolerance for boredom, it also does not admit the profound idleness that benefits the creative process...A purely hectic rush produces nothing new. The 'gift of listening' is based on the ability to grant deep, contemplative attention – which remains inaccessible in the hyperactive ego.”

In the second book, *The Scent of Time*, Han elaborates on this “scattered mode of awareness.” He writes that “time is lacking a rhythm that would provide order, and thus it falls out of step.” There is an “atomization of time,” with our lives “no longer embedded in any ordering structures or coordinates that would found duration.” By jumping from one thing to another, we lose context and commitment. Han isn't saying we shouldn't dwell in the present moment. Rather, we should have threads (or rivers) of duration, of continuity, through these moments, rather than a scattershot of often unconnected instants and events. With new technology, I find myself succumbing to this atomization more than I used to, and I suspect many of you do too. I avoided texting for quite a while after it became available. Now, by jumping to a text, or feeling compelled to write one at this moment, I am diverted and scattered. The same is true when I jump from one Internet link to another, or do Google searches in the middle of a task, reading, or rest. Life becomes noisier. I lose depth and at times lose my center. I also lose time to do the things I most want to do.

So what does one do in the face of these challenges? I'm not terribly optimistic about things getting better in general. If we look at the last 100 years, distractions have increased continually, and the rate of increase has risen significantly this century. Apps now are available to tell us how much time we're spending on our phones, and the operating system on my iPhone began informing me about that last year. But does it make a difference? People who try “electronic Sabbaths” often give up. We can say we will leave our phone behind or turn it off, something commonplace not very long ago. But that has

become more difficult in recent years, especially with the societal expectation that we will be electronically available during waking hours. Paul's virtue of self-control is an important one, but not easy to abide by in the presence of addictive technologies.

One balm that is possible in everyday life – at least a life in which a person is not working long hours – is spending time in the natural world, with senses open, and mind and body truly aware of our surroundings. It is hugely helpful for me. I'm not necessarily talking about serious hiking into wilderness, kayaking, or anything strenuous, as marvelous as they might be. Simply walking or sitting in a nearby park or forest, and taking in the trees, streams, birds, and whatever else with open eyes, ears, and other senses, can restore me. Moving from doing and thinking mode to observing the marvels of nature quiets my mind, creates space, and allows for contemplation. It also invokes for me a sense of wonder that rarely exists when I am on my computer, dwelling in an electronic and perhaps virtual world.

Rachel Carson is best known as the woman who awakened us to the danger of pesticides, and to a lesser extent as the author of two amazing books on the sea and its edge. Carson also wrote about awakening our sense of wonder, though, our ability to be astonished. With this awakening, she said, we deepen the capacity to encounter the great mystery of life. She suggested that we open our eyes to unnoticed beauty in nature, asking ourselves, "What if I had never seen this before? What if I knew I would never see it again?" Doing so, in Carson's words, allows one to "drink in the beauty and wonder at the meaning of what you see."

Thoreau, who wrote so eloquently about nature and the wonders of close, quiet observation of the natural world, also provides an example, even though our society does not encourage the slowness, spaciousness, and idleness he espoused. (As Han says, the modern world is obsessed with the

vita activa, and shuns the vita contemplativa.) I love this passage from the “Sounds” chapter of Thoreau’s Walden:

“There were times when I could not afford to sacrifice the bloom of the present moment to any work, whether of the head or hands. I love a broad margin to my life.

Sometimes, in a summer morning, having taken my accustomed bath, I sat in my sunny doorway from sunrise till noon, rapt in a reverie, amidst the pines and hickories and sumacs, in undisturbed solitude and stillness, while the birds sang around or flitted noiseless through the house, until by the sun falling at my west window, or the noise of some traveler’s wagon on the distant highway, I was reminded of the lapse of time.”

Of course, we can take our smartphones into the woods where there is cell coverage – and a recent article in the New York Times said that within ten years probably no place in the entire country will lack coverage. Universal coverage is good in many ways, and not in others. But we can also leave our phones behind, or turn them off, or switch them to Airplane Mode. We can choose to create protected spaces where we are not bombarded, where we can be still and quiet inside, and where we can do our best not to cover up the sky. We can find times to do that at home too. For me, the quiet time in nature helps me to be more tranquil at home.

I have told a couple of people who expect to get a hold of me that I will be turning off my phone more often when I am out or at home. I am also going to start keeping track of the hours I spend on the Internet. I’m not sure how well I’ll do. But it’s important to at least try in earnest to stop covering up the sky.