

## The Tao of iPod

Annie Welsbacher, First Unitarian Universalist Church, Wichita, January 25, 2009

*Gadgets: The downfall of a free society, electric litter paving an inexorable path to our culture's moral, intellectual, spiritual, and inevitable destruction.*

If you are an American living in the 21st century, you likely have fretted over this topic, or some variation on it. You might even have done more than just fret: read stories online, e-mailed, pod-casted, text messaged, twittered, Googled, or pontificated on your cell phone about it—possibly while driving somewhere that you found with the help of Mapquest.

Oh, you worry: Your kids can't do their homework without at least two electronic doodads playing simultaneously, friends who used to talk to you in person now mass-e-mail you slightly off-color jokes, God knows what sorts of cancerous rays are toasting your brain cells every day.

This isn't at the top of the list of any sensibly paranoid 21st-century American—far too many other horrific dangers beckon to us daily, from human warfare to the poisonings of our planet's great life-giving gifts, to the snuffing out of our collective thinking skills that the modern cults passing themselves off as “media” inflict upon us.

But it's there, lurking below the surface, this vague worry that all these toys can't possibly be good for us. They're diluting Art, reducing it to snappy tunes and pyrotechnic tricks; they're stealing away our reading time, replacing it with the popcorn of TV commercials; they're sucking us into the capitalist evils of American excess and damning us to live out golden days that will be consumed with the work of disposing of all the junk we accumulated, and that now corrodes in our basements.

But wait. It occurred to me—while jogging along the wildflower-strewn bed of what once supported railroad tracks laid down for a form of transport nobody uses anymore—that I have heard all this before.

I grew up in an academic 1970s household, and remember parties at which people stood around imbibing white wine and martinis, rueing the ruination of our society's culture. A popular refrain of the day was: “Theatre is Life; Film is Art; Television is Furniture.”

I distinctly remember my father—who, if you press him on it, will acknowledge that he has a PhD, but who in general has little tolerance for anything even mildly effluent of pretention—saying to me that when somebody furrowed an eyebrow at him and uttered that “television is furniture” bit, he liked to smile sweetly and reply, “oh, I'll watch any old crap”—except he didn't use the word “crap.” He said this usually shut them up so he could go back to watching Bullwinkle or Hee Haw or the WSU football game with a clear head.

I like listening to my iPod when I jog. I set it on “shuffle” and it takes me places I didn’t expect to go. Sometimes places I didn’t particularly *want* to go. I know that Corey programmed those songs onto its soulless, metal-encased trappings of zeros and ones, so the hapless little machine really isn’t some deranged Hal taking control of my brain. But I swear sometimes that iPod has its moods. Out of a selection of more than one thousand tunes, it will decide to play four Warren Zevon songs in a row. Or it will devise a peculiar time-warp around the Beatles, wrapping something from Paul McCarthy’s Wings around a song by John and Yoko and then closing the set with George Harrison singing about All Those Years Ago.

How and why did it skip the group itself, the reason those soloists even had their own songs? And isn’t it lovely that Ringo hasn’t changed a whit after all these years? And why is that? Is it that, lacking the vapid beauty that thrust the other three into the limelight, he was able to live a relatively more normal life and escape the murderous consequences of the rocker lifestyle? Or did his mediocrity as a musician have something to do with it? And what is the meaning of “mediocre” anyway—aren’t all measures of success or beauty completely subjective?

Likewise, there are days when I really don’t *want* to hear Ani DeFranco spew invective at society or former lovers; what I want is the good wholesome kick of a Kinks song, or the quick wit of Bach, but there instead is Ani DeFranco, spitting away in some nonlinear fashion completely at odds with my feet, and since I’m busy trying not to get hit by an oncoming SUV, I can’t look for the forward button to skip over her. So what happens is, her words disappear, and I notice, for the first time, that she’s done something canny musically right there in that measure, slid in something I think might be *hip-hop*, forced me to listen to something I have always despised.

Then I am thinking about the mathematics of music, and how I never would have expected that dissonance to work the way it did, and then, suddenly, I am back at my own front steps, my ode to my blood pressure and endorphin needs finished for the day.

In the past hour, I have pondered Art with a capital A, aging, failure, success, Beauty, and death—topics it never would have occurred to me to think about, had I not stuck that piece of cord in my ear.

I remember younger days when I ran along the Mississippi, headphone-free. I noted the leaves decaying into the muddy banks of the river, saw sunlight dappled by half naked branches of birch trees. I contemplated words I had memorized from wisdom traditions, and even now when I recall them, they boomerang me back to particular bridges and bends in the river that guided me back home. I treasure those memories, and I am glad I had my holy moments one-on-one with the planet around me. But just as I love red *and* green, company *and* solitude, classical *and* bluegrass, I am glad for the unpredictable insights that I have found with both silence *and* my iPod.

Certainly, there are lessons to be taken from the past about the damning potential of gadgets. In a NY Times article, Charles Morris wrote: “The 1870s saw possibly the

fastest sustained growth in American history ... with the rapid spread of the railroads and the telegraph, new department stores and mail-order catalogs pressured local producers with mass-produced goods, a precursor to the Wal-Mart era. ... The productivity shock was comparable to that from the Internet in our own day.”

David Tierney notes about the same era, in another Times article: “As people abandoned farms and small towns, they lost communal bonds; as personal incomes rose, public air and water got dirtier.... Indoor plumbing and washing machines freed women of onerous work, but there was less socializing at wells.”

A technology reporter for a medical Web site noted an array of health hazards littering the short distance between you and your electronic toys. Working at night in front of a lit monitor can screw up your internal clock; other potential hazards are repetitive stress injuries, obesity, permanent hearing loss, accidents from use of gadgets while driving, and even asthma, which might be triggered by some models of laser printers shooting out invisible particles that can lodge deep in the lungs.

And, as very well demonstrated online at [storyofstuff.com](http://storyofstuff.com) by Annie Leonard (everybody should watch this disturbing, funny performance), the effect on our planet of the American cycle of consumerism—a broader topic than what I address today—has been and continues to be devastating.

But most of the negatives about technology and new inventions don’t live in isolation. As Tierney notes, “Although new technology is often described as a Faustian bargain, historically it has involved a trade-off not between materialism and spirituality but between individual freedom and social virtue.” He says,

“Technology’s victims have become familiar images in the media: on-line addicts who don’t know their next-door neighbors; workers displaced by machines...; frazzled parents, especially working mothers, too busy to spend time with their children. We contrast these pathetic figures with images of a happier past, ... when people still had time to read, contemplate the meaning of life, visit with their relatives and neighbors.

“But when exactly,” he continues “were those halcyon days?... Before the Industrial Revolution, the average person ... was short-lived, [and] illiterate.... Women’s lives were consumed with domestic chores and continual pregnancies... [even] after the Industrial Revolution, ... people still didn’t have much time to sit around discussing the classics or communing with nature. In the middle of the 19th century, the typical man in Britain worked more than 60 hours a week, with no annual vacation, from age 10 until he died at about 50.

...“Contrary to popular stereotypes,” he continues, “... the workweek has been shortening, ... [and] parents are spending as much time with their children as they did in the 1960s. These children ... are less likely to live with two parents, which may be partly a consequence of technology that has made divorce and single parenthood less of an economic burden: men and women ...[today often]... can both support themselves,

relying on machines to make clothes, clean house, and do most food preparation. But new technology is hardly the only cause of the traditional family's decline, and in any case, it's hard to get too nostalgic for the days when women had no choice but to stay in the kitchen."

Technology's potentials reach beyond domestic aid, significant as this is. In his book, *The Audacity of Hope*, our president—whose status as president exists at least in part because of the electronic devices of this century—describes a tour in its nascent days of the Google offices.

"... a three-dimensional image of the earth rotated on a large flat-panel monitor. ... 'These lights represent all the searches ... going on right now,' an engineer said. 'Each color is a different language. ... you can see traffic patterns of the entire Internet system.' The image was mesmerizing, more organic than mechanical, as if I were glimpsing early stages of some accelerating evolutionary process, in which all ... boundaries ... —nationality, race, religion, wealth—were rendered invisible and irrelevant, so that the physicist in Cambridge, the bond trader in Tokyo, the student in a remote Indian village, and the manager of a Mexico City department store were drawn into a single, constant, thrumming conversation, time and space giving way to a world spun entirely out of light."

Obama's account is a striking illustration, I think, of the hopeful possibilities of a world sewn together in communication and industry, one example of the positive potential of modern electronic gadgets. But he continues: "Then I noticed the broad swaths of darkness as the globe spun on its axis—most of Africa, chunks of South Asia, even some portions of the United States, where the thick cords of light dissolved into a few discrete strands."

Technological devices might offer all people a means to lift themselves up, but more importantly, I think, devices can show us—more graphically than even good oratory can—where our hard work remains in achieving true parity.

When you think about it, the alleged evils of "new contraptions"—or at least, our *fears* of their dubious evils—began plaguing us long ago. Talkies were supposed to spell the end of live theatre—but got their comeuppance, since today, the movie industry regularly bemoans its own exaggerated demise in the face of home DVD players. Radio, that heralded pastime of yore, ushered in the modern era of propaganda as a political tool. Cameras killed portraiture—and today are major players in museums and the creation of fine art.

Further back: Actors once thrived as traveling "journalists," going from village to village to deliver the news orally; when printed pages containing the news, the precursors to tabloid newspapers—themselves now in danger of extinction—came into being, they put a whole slew of actors out of business. Anybody notice a shortage of thespians today?

And further: Gutenberg's press, besides putting all those monks out of business, also made obsolete the concept of mnemonic devices, which might have weakened our ability as a species to memorize. Probably more significantly, the Gutenberg press, because it made possible mass printing, diluted the power of the Church by spreading literacy beyond its high, narrow, isolated walls.

You can go even earlier if you want to. According to some historians, many Greeks absolutely detested the construction of "that new mall"—also known as the Acropolis. And the invention that has really gotten us into trouble over the years was that of fire.

David Tierney even suggests, in his article, that the human brain itself was perhaps our earliest "new gadget": "The original Information Revolution," he says, "occurred during the Pleistocene, a decentralized era if there ever was one, when hunter-gatherers on the African savanna developed a powerful new computer: the human brain. [It] evolved to its large size because its information-processing capacity enabled humans to band together and increase their chances of survival."

We tend to think of computer-like gadgets as the purvey of the young. There's that joke that centers around the idea of the computer so easy to use that a 10-year-old could manage it, but the elder is stymied because he doesn't have a 10-year-old in the house. But in my life—and I'm guessing I'm not alone here—my parents discovered and embraced many gadgets long before I did. CT scanners, for instance. MRI machines. Chemotherapy IV monitors. Cunningly designed needles that inject anticoagulants so easily that even a 53-year-old can do it.

For those of use circling ever closer to that generally shared human goal of getting old, I offer a purely pragmatic reason to try to embrace the kids' new gadgets: They're *here*, and they aren't going anywhere soon. And the kids, at least some of them, seem to understand how they can be used in positive ways. I was in an e-newsletter class recently, and a (younger) classmate there challenged my tired old definition of a "nerd"—that clichéd, pasty-skinned adolescent boy chained to his computer monitor, capable of speaking only through a screen or ear device, going days without human contact, much less having any real social skills.

Apparently, as she patiently informed me, there actually are *human* chat groups, where friends who've met online get together in person. They don't talk about devices or their favorite websites. They talk about life, love, Saturday's plans—the stuff of eternity. And they never would have met if they hadn't shared some esoteric hyphenated abbreviated acronymated passion like FaceBook or MySpace or Podcasts or Twitter.

What gadgets like iPods have to offer us, in the end, is—like so much else in the world we inhabit—an entirely subjective matter, based not on what *they* are, but on *who we* are.

Whether jogging, running a family, experiencing the companionship and loss of loved ones, or seeking your own spiritual path through life, the gadgets we create along the way are neither evil destroyers nor enlightened saviors. In the final analysis, what matters isn't

the tools you use, but how you as a person choose to embrace, ignore, interpret, or flourish using them.

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Notes

*New York Times*, September 28, 1997, John Tierney, “Technology Makes Us Better; Our Oldest Computer, Upgraded.”

*New York Times*, June 2, 2006, Charles R. Morris, “Freakoutonomics.”

WebMD, March 10, 2008, Susan Kuchinskas, “7 Ways High-Tech Gadgets Could Be Hurting You.”