

# **I PREFER THINGS THE WAY THEY USED TO BE**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

I don't make New Year's resolutions any more. It isn't that I have anything against them, but looking back over more than a half a century, I can't remember a single resolution that I actually kept.

So today, instead, I have a New Year's wish list...eight technology-related statements that I would never like to hear again. I won't say they are "pet peeves," but they are certainly well on their way to approaching "pet" status. Perhaps you will resonate with some and I harbor no doubts that you will disagree with others. Still, this is my 8-point list, so let's get going.

## **NUMBER 8 - I PREFER THINGS THE WAY THEY USED TO BE**

No you don't. Not unless you mean, of course, that you prefer to read by kerosene lamp, heat your home with a pot-bellied stove, copy documents using carbon paper, or walk across the room every time you want to change channels. From man's first use of tools, we have benefited from the constantly developing technologies that have, for the most part, made our lives better.

The technologies that challenged and sometimes distressed us a generation ago are now part of the fabric of our lives. Many of us were intimidated when the first personal computers appeared on our desktops and we wondered if we would ever

understand the mysteries of MS DOS or manage the coded world of 8-letter file names. Now, a quarter of a century later, the cell phones we all have on our hips have far more computing power than the first personal computers. Today we enjoy debating the merits of competing operating systems, or how much disk storage a computer needs. We talk about front side bus speeds, heat sinks, Bluetooth and WiFi networking. The world has changed; we have changed.

May I say, kindly, to all who would like things to be the way they used to be...get over it? There is no going back. Typewriters will never again be on every desktop. You can retire your Princess phone. Computers and cell phones are here to stay. You can't fight the technology war and win. You can only negotiate the terms of your surrender.

#### **NUMBER 7 - I DON'T / WON'T HAVE A TELEVISION IN MY HOME**

Woops...here I will probably step on a lot of toes. It is not my purpose, however, to be controversial or confrontational. I just have a hard time with technological and cultural monasticism. There is no question that television viewing is out of control in far too many homes. Too many children no longer go outside to play, preferring instead to stare mindlessly at their bedroom TV. It is an unfortunate reality, too, that legions of parents worldwide are choosing to use the television as their resident babysitter, even as they allow, without comment or concern, inappropriate content to come into the home. And no one can question that decades of a deteriorating television product has encouraged a moral and cultural desensitization to sexual content and violence.

But to avoid television completely is not, in my opinion, the answer. It is a critical element of cultural engagement. When I worked at a small bible college in Virginia, I planted myself in our vice president's office one day and asked when the miracle happens? Not understanding, he asked me what I meant. Again, I asked at what point during the graduation ceremony do our pastoral students change from students who could not be trusted to watch television responsibly even in the school's common areas, into the trained church leaders who would soon be called upon to shepherd their congregations through the most difficult issues of life and faith? Since my friend did not answer, I decided the miracle must happen when they cross the platform to receive their diplomas; I could see no other option.

Clearly in the home we must provide for access controls and parental supervision. Helpful tools are now built into most televisions and cable systems to assist in the effort. A caring, involved parent is the best protection against television abuse. But with the continuing decline of our community newspapers and the incredible range of quality programming options (I love the Travel Channel, the Discovery Channel, the Learning Channel, the Food Network, CNN, Fox News, MSNBC, CSpan and others), surely it is a better way to teach the lessons of personal responsibility than to artificially cloister our children.

#### **NUMBER 6 - I DON'T / WON'T ALLOW THE INTERNET IN MY HOME**

I hear this statement often, and it expresses a valid concern. The Internet, sadly, provides unprecedented access to materials and images that, if I had my way, would not

exist, much less be so broadly available. *Great* care must be exercised in its use, not only for our children but for all of us who surf the web. I can think of no cultural influence that has exacted as great a toll among our pastoral leaders as has Internet pornography. Indeed the pastor of a church I attended several years ago disappeared completely from ministry after acknowledging publicly a problem with Internet porn. It was a terrible loss to the local church and deeply impacted everyone in the congregation.

Not since movable type, however, has any development so dramatically changed the world as has the Internet. Virtually by itself it has changed the face of education, transforming it from an economy of scarcity to an economy of abundance. It has changed the business world, changed personal and mass communications, and, in very real ways, changed the way we do ministry. As a research tool, it is clearly unequalled, and nothing else puts the world at our doorstep the way that the Internet does. (My sister in Lynchburg, Virginia, is studying Welsh through the BBC website. Through the Internet she is now engaged in a community charity in Wales to benefit men and women she will never meet. Incredible!)

To deny the Internet to ourselves and to our families is easy, but it cannot long be the answer. To paraphrase a sage of generations past, the abuse does not negate the proper use. As individual believers and as the community of faith we must emphasize the proper use of the Internet and advocate for greater oversight. The Internet, however, is here to stay and complete avoidance just doesn't seem to be a viable option.

So when using the Internet, please take care. Institute parental controls. Secure the web with appropriate content filters and if a concern persists, ask your spouse or accountability partner to set the password. Do whatever is necessary to optimize the benefits of this incredible technological development while limiting the downside. Just don't run, because you can't hide.

#### **NUMBER 5 - I PREFER TO USE MY DESK CALENDAR**

No, this is not an attempt to convert every process to a digital format. I have never understood, for instance, why anyone would spend thousands of dollars to buy an incredibly-powerful computer system just to balance their checkbook. Against all advice, I recently helped a member of my family acquire an HP TouchSmart™ computer with a 500 GB hard drive and dual core Intel processor for one purpose...to generate mailing labels from a 30 KB Microsoft Works data file. Can anyone spell overkill?

What then is my concern? Simply this: More and more we live in a connected world. Our decisions are often not made in isolation. Here at the seminary, for example, we seek to work collaboratively, sharing information and facilitating discussions through the technology tools available to all who work within our system. When an individual opts out of the process because of preference or simple stubbornness, it negatively impacts organizational effectiveness. Anyone who has needed to ask a colleague to walk down the hall to check a desk calendar when the owner is unavailable knows the frustration of disengagement by preference.

We don't have to embrace every technology option. Personally, I have decided that I won't buy or play the computer games that could easily fritter away my free time while quickly depleting my wallet. (OK, I did spend \$9.99 on Mahjong Tiles for my PDA, but that is it...I promise.) Mine was a personal decision for a personal activity. When in community, however, opting out because of preference is really not an option. It is an operational roadblock.

#### **NUMBER 4 - DON'T TELL ME SOMETHING I DON'T NEED TO KNOW**

Now this is a pet peeve, full blown. Why do some people refuse to learn anything more than the list of keystrokes needed to perform a single task? As soon as they are asked to copy a file to a disk, or resize an image for the web, they shut down until someone creates a new list of keystrokes. Typically, that means that someone else who is already very busy must come to their aid.

We must encourage an attitude in ourselves and in others that pursues personal growth and professional exploration. We cannot know everything, but we must strive to know enough to excel in our roles and responsibilities. Others in ministry are depending on us.

#### **NUMBER 3 - I HIRE PEOPLE WHO KNOW ABOUT TECHNOLOGY**

In years past I knew the president of a ministry organization who refused to learn anything about technology. "I hire people to take care of all that," he would say proudly.

In the past 30 years I have become convinced that any leader in the 21<sup>st</sup> century who willfully fails to engage what is arguably the dominant driving force in commerce and culture, has effectively forfeited the right to leadership.

Please understand what I am NOT saying. I am not suggesting that a prospective ministry leader must also qualify to be the organization's director of information technology. Neither does he or she need to be a "geek" or have the hands-on ability to build a website, edit video or set the clock on the toaster oven (I can't do that either). What I am saying is that a leader must be sufficiently equipped and aware to consider the current and future impact of evolving technologies on the way we do ministry. What are the trends? How will new technologies change the way we do ministry? What new doors of opportunity will open? What doors might close? What will our personnel needs be considering the new tools at our disposal? Where do we invest ourselves for the future? These are difficult questions that require an engaged leader. He may not always – or ever – have all the answers. Who does? The problem lies in expecting someone else to ask the questions.

## **NUMBER 2- THE UNITED STATES LEADS THE WORLD IN TECHNOLOGY**

I have touched on this in previous columns, but it is still getting on my nerves. It is a wonderful thing to be proud of the United States and our accomplishments over the past 232 years. We are, indeed, a world leader in many significant arenas including the development of many dominant technologies. But let's not let hegemony get in the way of reality.

Our car industry – the Big Three - clearly is no longer dominant. Recent events have made that abundantly clear. Sony, Panasonic, Samsung, and Toshiba hold a substantial lead over our domestic companies in personal electronics. The great majority of cell phones are not designed and manufactured in the United States, but in Europe. India has perhaps the largest and best trained technology workforce with China looming large on the industrial and technological horizon.

Why is our attitude such a concern? Isn't it just indicative of a justifiably proud nation? Not when it gets in the way of ministry. We still make decisions based upon our perception that the United State is the first world and everyone else lives in the third world. We don't pursue meaningful ministry outreach because the rest of the world just isn't prepared to engage. They don't have the technologies, they don't have the trained personnel, and they don't have the financial resources to benefit from our efforts. One day, perhaps, they will, but not now.

I am an American by choice having been born the citizen of another country. I am indeed proud of who we are and what we have accomplished as a nation. Honesty and accuracy, however, are no threat to any nation. We will only be fully-available to God for ministry when we are able to accept and act upon reality.

**NUMBER 1 - I AM TOO OLD**



Give me a break. I hear people my age (later 50's) saying that they are too old to be technologically aware or competent. That, my friends, is utter nonsense. (Nonsense is always utter...don't know why.) The fastest growing demographic in the United States? Seniors. The fastest growing group of users online? Seniors.

My father passed away earlier this year at 82. I now have his computer system on my desk at home. It is by far the best computer I own. He had it networked with my mother's laptop, sharing a printer and the Internet, and all to create brochures and publications for his favorite organizations. My mother still uses the Internet to download embroidery patterns for download onto her sewing machine. I truly had a bigger problem keeping up with my parents than with the majority of people I interact with professionally.

And that is not unusual. I teach seniors in our church, and all of them keep in touch with me by email. They send me photos, articles, and interesting web links. Age is not a reason for not being technologically informed; it is an excuse. We do what we want to do, and the reality is that too many very bright people just don't want to make the effort. That is fine; it is their right. I just ask that they don't blame their age.

## **CONCLUSION**

So that is my list. Agree? Disagree? Do you have others that you would add to your own list? I only have 8 on my list and I am wide open to adding yours if you can

make your case. In the next edition, I will share your responses with other readers so please don't hesitate to drop me a line at [jstewart@westernseminary.edu](mailto:jstewart@westernseminary.edu). Until then...