

Finding Our Balance

Jim Stewart

Published in the July 2009 issue of the multi-lingual online journal www.GlobalMissiology.org, Technology and Culture section.

INTRODUCTION

It seems that many of my colleagues are increasingly convinced that the mark of the beast will not be “666” as some would believe; but rather a great and gaudy Microsoft logo affixed to the forehead. They sincerely, even passionately, question my interest in, and clear enthusiasm for, the digital technologies that are transforming our world. Would the world not be better if we all could return to those halcyon days before Bill Gates unleashed the technology hounds? If only we could once again be free from the always-urgent e-mail messages, or from the hated voicemail systems that happily commit us to new work obligations even as we seek to escape.

ONE POSITION – TECHNOLOGY IS HELPFUL

Contrary to popular belief here at Western Seminary, I don't begin my day with a deferential bow toward Redmond, Washington. I have no desire to own *every* new toy or to greet *every* new product announcement with a happy dance. I do, however, have a deep and abiding appreciation for what evolving technologies have meant, and continue to mean, in my life and in the lives of many others. I owe so much to the men and women who have invested their brilliance and their hard work in the development of technology resources that have simply made life better. Or, in some instances, even possible.

One of my earliest memories is of running across the fields of London, Ontario, to greet my father upon his return from hospital late in 1961. He had suffered a devastating heart attack in October of that year and his life teetered in the balance for more than 6 weeks. A few decades before he would not have survived, but technology helped to bring him home to us. For the next 46 years he lived with heart disease. In 1971 he had a Vineberg, a heart operation that diverted the two mammary arteries to the heart muscle to increase blood supply, in an effort to address significant heart blockages. In 1977, a triple bypass – a brand new operation that had been made possible by recent advances in technology – gave him back to us when the Vineberg failed.

Prior to his death last year to Mantle Cell Lymphoma, dad had additional angioplasty procedures, a single bypass and valve repair, and other interventions that gave him both quality and longevity of life. My family and I enjoyed my father for those 46 years because a host of gifted individuals had pioneered the application of technologies to *our* need. Today, on behalf of both my mother and my niece who are battling life-threatening cancers, we continue to pray for, and count on, new diagnostic tools and medical advances that benefit from ever-newer technologies.

Professionally, as an educator, I marvel each day at the opportunity my colleagues and I have to extend the teaching ministry of Western Seminary to men and women around the world. Mediating technologies that include the incredibly-powerful “world wide web,” e-mail, DVD ROM systems, and streaming media together making accessible world-class training to those who are at the front line serving Christ effectively;

otherwise would not be possible a few years ago. This is not correspondence school. This is Western Seminary...alive, dynamic and interactive through the Center of Life-long Learning.

This is not to say that I do not have concerns. I remember well, as a young boy growing up in Ottawa, I would head out after school each day to join my friends in touch football or road hockey. It was impossible in the early 1970s to navigate the suburban roads of the city in the fall or winter months without having to wait repeatedly for the neighborhood kids to move their nets.

Sad to say it is not the case nowadays. Where are the kids? I have lived in the suburbs of Vancouver, Washington, for more than 15 years, and I have never seen even two kids in our community playing catch. Not a single football game. Not a single occasion when I had to slow my car because kids were outside simply having fun.

Where are they? I am afraid they are too often closeted in their bedrooms, alone, chatting online or playing a video game. Their parents have given them mobile phones with unlimited text messaging plans so that they, apparently, need never meet face to face with friends. I was saddened to hear recently of the young California girl who made 14,528 text messages in one month. Another New Zealand girl burns so rapidly through the 6000 text messages she is allowed each month that she borrows the cell phones of others so that she can keep on going without missing a beat. I have even heard of two

women sitting side by side in a waiting room, not talking quietly but choosing instead to text one another. That is frightening.

ANOTHER POSITION – TECHNOLOGY IS HURTFUL

In 1982 Jeff Bridges starred in the futuristic movie “Tron.” His character, by some creative plot twist, ended up inside a computer, lost in a binary world. I fear that many in this new generation, born since the digital revolution and knowing no other life, are losing themselves inside the artificial world of technology. They do not see technology as a tool, as the means to a better end, but as the end itself.

It is, unfortunately; yet a global reality. The “virus of “technology-abuse” may have been nurtured within and by the innovation of North America, but it has been the agent of its own transmission. As the Internet has connected the continents, and as the marketplace has become truly global, unfettered technophilia has spread from nation to nation, and from culture to culture.

We cannot turn back the tide: the Pandora’s box has been opened, the barn door was left open and the horses have escaped...(choose your metaphor)...and nothing will change the fact. We can, however, **help others to find their own balance**, a way to live profitably in the midst of a changed, and changing, world.

First, we must avoid the desire to rail against technology. It will only serve to marginalize ourselves and weaken our voice and diminish our impact. The earth is round, it does rotate around the sun, and technology clearly does have a place in our world. To deny the latter is to be included with those who believe the former and to be moved, against our will, to the periphery.

Second, unthinking advocacy of technology is also foolish. Technology is not always morally-neutral, and its application surely is not. The inappropriate or unbalanced use of technology can have a terribly detrimental impact. Why is it that we are so concerned about the danger to our ecosystem when non-native species of plants are introduced to our environment, or what would happen if the snail-garter were allowed to go extinct because of a new housing development, but we seem to have no concern when it comes to the influence these new systems are having on our children and on our social systems!

We must find our balance. Technology has yet much to offer our world. I am counting on it to find a cure for Mom and my niece, for Michael J. Fox, and Ed Dobson. I am looking forward to being able to bring the finest educational opportunities to the global community in the name of Jesus. And yet, I must join my voice with the many thousands of others who are deeply concerned that we are losing a priceless generation.

SOME FINAL THOUGHTS

I understand that to some I am a geek. And if Bill Gates were to offer to adopt me, I probably would accept. (Like, I might say no?) Still, I strive each day **to find for myself the balance** I encourage for others.

What do you think? How do you find balance? Is there a balance, or perhaps even the need for balance? Why not drop me a line at jstewart@westernseminary.edu, and let's begin a conversation. It is simply too important to remain silent.

Published, "Technology & Culture" in the July 2009 issue of the online journal www.GlobalMissiology.org

