The Way of Words

Change so often bespeaks progress and growth - and our world is changing in dramatic fashion; particularly in the manner in which we communicate with one another. But are these innovations serving us well, or are they, in their superefficiency, actually managing to separate us. That's the issue I' d like to take up this evening in fashion both anecdotal and semi-philosophic. It struck me as being of relevance in our daily lives a couple of months ago when I was strolling down the shopping area of Chestnut street with two young (in their twenties) grandchildren. Each had one of those remarkable, little camera/phone devices pressed to an ear. They were about two feet apart -faced in opposite directions - and they were talking to one another by phone.

What hath technology wrought?

Where have all our words gone?

Into a technological whirling-dervish that leaches them of any humanity. Well, I labored that metaphor more than a little, but I was recalling Rabbi Pearce's delightful talk last year of the importance of same, and overdid it a bit

What brave new world that has such devices in it.

Communication has always been so vital to our humanity, whether we were troglodytes sending up smoke signals or scratching stick figures on a cave wall, or Homer (yes, there was a real Homer they now tell us, not just a name for a chorus of voices perpetuating epic tales).

Are we somehow crippling the vital person-to person element?

I am now going to turn turn to a couple of writers with expertise in the field to

flesh out our predicament:

Sven Birkerts, author of "The Gutenberg Elegies:The Fate of Reading in an Electronic Age", put it this way:

"To use the new modes of communication, as I do - as we pretty much all do- is to accept the laws of the new system - both the changed sense of facility and access, and, yes, a growing difficulty with the former ways. Now, if I write, fold. address, stamp and post a letter, it almost feels like an imposition, like I'm pushing against the grain. But sometimes it is only by pushing that we discover there is a grain. That same recognition has arrived on many other fronts. We felt it at some point if we had to use coins in a pay phone, or wait in line at a bank, or when we couldn't use some person's message machine and had to leave the circuit .incomplete. Moving forward also means becoming unfit for staying back.

Caught up in such a radical overload of competing signals, the self naturally seeks

to preserve its equilibrium. We have several options. We may try to put curbs on intake, and if we can't just cut off the flow, we learn to direct our attention selectively, or else we economize by skimming, taking in the highlights of a book, an event, a speech or conversation. Where possible, we speed ourselves up or divide our awareness in such a way that we can carry on several activities at once - we multitask.The technology helps: we can set up meetings using the mobile phone when driving, edit files while catching up on the news. This capability is increasingly needed - an asset - and therefore is increasingly rewarded. But again, it's worth inquiring about the cost, which is surely a loss of focus, attention and

connectedness. The lines are by no means distinct. I discover with surprise that I

am able to answer an e-mail while talking on the phone, though I'm also aware that

I'm not performing either exchange as well as I could. We trade one set of aptitudes

for another, and, as we do, we dilute further our sense of being grounded in our

material reality.

Another critic, Sherry Turkle, makes a point tht appeals to me in her lively, well

written treatise titled

"Reclaiming Conversation The Power of Talk in the Digital Age". She begins her

case by turning to someone many people think of - mistakenly - as a hermit who

tried to get away from talk. In 1845, Henry David Thoreau moved to a cabin in

Walden Pond in Massachusetts, to live more "deliberately" - away from the crush

of random chatter. But the cabin furniture he chose to secure that ambition

suggests no simple "retreat." He said that in his cabin there were "three chairs - one

for solitude, two for friendship, and three for society.

These three chairs plot the points on a virtuous circle that links conversation to

the capacity for empathy and self-reflection. In solitude, we find ourselves, we

prepare ourselves to come to conversation with something that is authentic. When

we are secure in ourselves, we are able to listen to other people and really hear

what they have to say. And then in conversation with other people, we become

better at inner dialogue.

Of course, this virtuous circle is an ideal type, but taking that into account, it

works. Solitude reinforces a sense of self, and, with that, the capacity for empathy.

Then, conversation with others provides rich material for self-reflection. Just as alone , we prepare to talk together , together we learn how to engage in a more productive solitude.

Technology disrupts this virtuous circle.

The disruptions begin with solitude, Thoreau's first chair Recent research shows that people are uncomfortable if left alone with their thoughts, even for a few minutes. In one experiment, they were aked if they would consider administering electric shocks to themselves if they became bored. They said absolutely not. No matter what, shocking themselves would be out of the question. But after six minutes alone, they were doing just that.

The author called the results stunning, but in a way not surprising. These day.we see that in people alone at a stop sign or in the checkout line at the supermarket, they seem uneasy and they reach for those phones We are so accustomed to being always connected that being alone seems a problem technology should solve.

And this, Turkle argues, is where the virtuous circle breaks down. Afraid of being alone, we struggle to pay attention to ourselves. And what suffers is our ability to pay attention to each other. If we can't find our own center, we lose confidence in what we have to offer others. Or you can work the circle the other way. We struggle to pay attention to each other and what suffers is our ability to know ourselves.

We face flight from conversation that is also a flight from self-reflection, empathy and mentorship - the virtues of Thoreau's three chairs. With that, the critic claims she

has "good news": Despite the pull of our technology, we are resilient. For example,

in only five days at a summer camp that bans all electronic devices, children show an increased capacity for empathy as measured by their ability to identify with the feelings of others by looking at photographs and videos of people's faces .

And she's seen that resiliency in her own personal experience at just such a device-free camp. At a nightly cabin chat, a goup of fourteen-year-old boys talked about a recent three-day wilderness hike. Years ago, it might have been about "roughing it" or the beauty of untrodden nature. But what made the biggest impression was time withour a phone, what one boy called "time when you have nothing to do but sit quietly and talk to your friends." Another boy reflected on his new taste for silence: "Don't some people know that sometimes you can just look out the window of a car and see the world go by and it's wonderful"

Here's another anecdote that I find revealing. Howard Chen is creator of a social media site for a multi-national corporation. He is passionate about the necessity for advanced social media in his company because it has decided to close down local offices. In their place is a new system called "hoteling". When people need the resources of an office, they bring their computer to building where an automated system assigns them a room. When they get there and plug in their computer, a virtual telephone pops up on the screen. That is their company line for the day. They are "at work".

Chen praises the "sociability" of his social media. With only a few strokes he can call up the international database of all employees and their interests. This. he claims. This, he hopes, will be the basis for online connections and new connections. "Yeah," he says. "if you're a soccer fan. you can talk to all the other

soccer fans in the company. How cool is that?"

But there was another aspect to the set-up Call it depressing, or unnerving.

"(Once)" noted Chen " I was sitting there and i finished doing something and I looked around and you could hear a pin drop. And I'm like, this is ghostly. It's just horrible. So I took out my iPhone and I recorded the silence to show my wife. This is what it sounds like, or doesn't sound like, at work."

What better real-life example of what we face today. Silence instead of sound.

Am I being too harsh on our new technology? Am just an old fogy - and a Luddite, to boot, who just doesn't have the capacity to concede its advantages. No, no. Let's take a look at some of the positive factors that come with it.

Jennifer Jolly wrote in a New York Times article that a doctor friend once told her that the best thing she could do for her health was to turn off her cellphone. But that , she said, was before smartphone makers began building health and safety features into their devices. She cited several features.

One was voice-activated 911. When Sam Ray was trapped beneath the two-ton truck he was working on the pressure pinning his body activated a system called Siri on the iphone he had tucked in his back pocket. Sam yelled for the digital assistant to dial. It worked and Sam was rescued. Siri was a savior.

Another development was was Apple's Medical that turns any new model iPhone into a mobile medical alert bracelet. Setting it up allows doctors or medical emergency to tap in and access potentially life=saving information.

With another that the reporter noted might be called spying, but she preferred to describe as just making sure everyone in the family is safe. Tap on a button and

you can see where they all are. Also, most smart phones now come equipped with motion sensors that measure steps, walking and running distance, and flights climbed.

Such developments do involve an important form of communication that is , to say the least, useful and important to the user.

And, by the same token, I' like to toss in an analysis the distinguished editor Jonathan Galassi:

"As Darwin pointed out, evolution is not a straight line of descent,but a bush that sends out shoots in ll directions; I'd say that's what happening in the literary culture at home and in the world at large. Literature has been democratizing exponentially in our lifetime, all kinds of inspiring and confusing results. Great writers have always come from everywhere. The process involves an enormous amount of trial and error, and publishers are in the thick of this.

"This great variety is also hitting up against a revolution in consumption that the digital era has produced. There will soon be universal availability of every book ever published , which is wonderful, but also creates an enormous forest of choice in reading at the same time that there is an ever-larger range of options in all media. Readers have become much more casual, less committed, more grazers than devotees, which makes hard sometimes to see the forest for the trees. You need to step back and get some perspective and eventually, the tallest trees, the necessary ones, will emerge."

Well, this little lecture has been somewhat discursive and I've taken around the mulberry bush a couple times in efforts to snare my elusive prey. But at least

you have had a human being in front of you, not a filament spinning canned

phrases. Is our streamlined new world of instant communication a great leap

 forward. Or is it actually serving to fence our lives and diminish our humanity.

Perhaps you can tell me.

Thank you very much.

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