

## WEEK 9 | DIGITAL PATHOLOGY, PT. 2

*The object of opening the mind, as of opening the mouth,  
is to shut it again on something solid.*

—G.K. Chesterton

### UNSKILLED

Many of us have already had the experience of walking into a McDonald's or sitting down at an IHOP to find ourselves served or waited upon by a machine—an experience, we are told, that will soon be the norm. As technology advances, it is becoming more and more cost-effective for machines to do the jobs once held by human beings. They can do it cheaper and, often, they can do it better. There is a growing concern that a labor crisis is not too far in the future, as they will simply not be enough jobs for unskilled laborers.

This dystopian future has deep roots. Long before machines were taking our jobs, they were depriving us of our skills by providing an easier alternative. Technology is, essentially, man's efforts to reverse the effects of the curse. Over the centuries we learned new skills and developed new techniques to make life in a fallen world a little easier. But, as Matthew Crawford has noted, with the rise of automation and online living there has been a sharp decline in the number of people physically making things with their own hands. So many of these skills are being lost.<sup>1</sup> Philosopher Albert Borgmann concludes that “technological liberation from the duress of daily life is only leading to more disengagement from skilled and bodily commerce with reality.”<sup>2</sup>

We have already talked at length about digital age being marked by disembodiment. Not only do we live more of our lives online, but in so many aspects of our lives we have outsourced work and activities to machines. In many cases, this is something we can be grateful for. It is a blessing to have washing machines that clean our clothes so that we do not have to walk to a river and wash them by hand. At the same time, there is a cost to outsourcing our work. Borgmann

illustrates this tradeoff with a telling comparison between giving a child a musical instrument, with lessons, and giving him or her a stereo set (he was writing, of course, before the appearance of the iPod). Both gifts have to do with making music. Indeed, the latter produces professional-quality music “right out of the box,” as they say. Still, the former gift—because it requires discipline and patience, as musical skills are painstakingly developed over time—stands a chance of making a significant and lasting impact upon the child's growth and

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<sup>1</sup> Sullivan, “I Used To Be a Human Being.”

<sup>2</sup> Albert Borgmann, *Technology and the Character of Contemporary Life: A Philosophical Inquiry* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 151.

development, instilling habits and producing character, as well as perhaps introducing him or her to a life-long vocation.<sup>3</sup>

More and more, we as a people are becoming “unskilled,” for “as automated systems relieve us of repetitive mental exercise—which, of course, is precisely what these systems have been designed to do—they undermine the possibility of learning.”<sup>4</sup> Though technology makes life easier, in some ways it diminishes us as human beings. We are less skilled, less learned, less capable, more simple, less able to fend for ourselves and be self-sustaining. Craig Gay writes,

As Lewis Mumford quipped nearly a hundred years ago in his celebrated history of technological development, *Technics and Civilization*, a good deal of our technical apparatus is useful in the same way that crutches are useful when one’s leg is broken: they’re better than nothing, but it’s far easier to get around on normally functioning legs. ‘The common mistake,’ Mumford continued, ‘is that of fancying that a society in which everyone is equipped with crutches is thereby more efficient than one in which the majority of people walk on two legs.’<sup>5</sup>

One author notes the ironic contribution of automated systems to several recent airline disasters. It was determined that human pilots had become so used to computer control that they had basically forgotten how to fly.<sup>6</sup>

In Genesis 2 God creates man, places him in the garden of Eden, and then gives him a vocation. He was “to work it and keep it” (Genesis 2:15). The verbs “work” and “keep” are found paired together in only one other context. As G.K. Beale writes,

When. . . these two words. . . occur together in the Old Testament (within an approximate 15-word range), they refer either to the Israelites ‘serving’ God and ‘guarding [keeping]’ God’s word (approximately 10 times) or to priests who ‘keep’ the ‘service’ (or ‘charge’) of the tabernacle (see Num. 3:7-8; 8:25-26; 18:5-6; 1 Chr. 23:32; Ezek. 44:14).<sup>7</sup>

Adam was the “archetypal priest who served in and guarded. . . God’s first temple.”<sup>8</sup> This was man’s purpose, to work in God’s world, cultivating God’s creation and protecting it from any

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<sup>3</sup> Craig M. Gay, *Modern Technology and the Human Future* (Downer’s Grove, IL: IVP, 2018), 6.

<sup>4</sup> Craig M. Gay, *Modern Technology and the Human Future* (Downer’s Grove, IL: IVP, 2018), 38.

<sup>5</sup> Craig M. Gay, *Modern Technology and the Human Future* (Downer’s Grove, IL: IVP, 2018), 8.

<sup>6</sup> Nicholas Carr, *The Glass Cage: Automation and Us* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2014), 43.

<sup>7</sup> G.K. Beale, *The Temple and the Church’s Mission: A Biblical Theology of the Dwelling Place of God* (Downers Grove, IL: 2004), 67.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

unholy or unclean thing that would seek to invade it. Our job, however, was not to passively watch over God's creation but to actively nurture it, expanding the garden—the place where God's presence dwelt—as we subdued the earth. We were meant to work. It's part of what gives us purpose and meaning in life because it was part of the purpose for which we were made. Andrew Sullivan, a secular author, recognizes the meaning that work gives to a human being:

Indeed, the modest mastery of our practical lives is what fulfilled us for tens of thousands of years—until technology and capitalism decided it was entirely dispensable. If we are to figure out why despair has spread so rapidly in so many left-behind communities, the atrophying of the practical vocations of the past—and the meaning they gave to people's lives—seems as useful a place to explore as economic indices.<sup>9</sup>

Technology is causing us to be unskilled, more reliant on machines and less reliant on ourselves, less likely to learn and develop new abilities. With this comes a loss of meaning. More leisure time does not provide fulfillment, and free time does not make someone happy. Lewis Mumford, writing in first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, unknowingly described what this digital world would be like:

Too dull to think, people might read: too tired to read, they might look at the moving pictures: unable to visit the picture theater they might turn on the radio: in any case, they might avoid the call to action: surrogate lovers, surrogate heroes and heroines, surrogate wealth filled their debilitated and impoverished lives and carried the perfume of unreality into their dwellings. And as the machine itself became, as it were, more active and human, reproducing the organic properties of eye and ear, the human beings who employed the machine as a mode of escape have tended to become more passive and mechanical. Unsure of their own voices, unable to hold a tune, they carry a phonograph or a radio set with them even on a picnic: afraid to be alone with their own thoughts, afraid to confront the blankness and inertia of their own minds, they turn on the radio and eat and talk and sleep to the accompaniment of a continuous stimulus from the outside world: now a band, now a bit of propaganda, now a piece of public gossip called news. Even such autonomy as the poorest drudge once had, left like Cinderella to her dreams of Prince Charming when her sisters went off to the ball, is gone in this mechanical environment: whatever compensations her present-day counterpart may have, it must come through the machine. Using the machine alone to escape from the machine, our mechanized populations have jumped from a hot frying pan into a hotter fire.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Sullivan, "I Used To Be a Human Being."

<sup>10</sup> Lewis Mumford, *Technics and Civilizations*, 315-16.

## UNLEARNED

As Lewis Mumford mentions above—and as we have briefly discussed in past lectures—the rise in digital technology has been accompanied by a dramatic decline in reading and general literacy. One study found that the average college graduate reads between 0 and 1 books per year. In other words, the average amongst those with higher education is to read less than one book in an entire year. At the same time, various research has shown there is significant variation in reading habits. For many, digital technology has increased the amount of reading they do because, thanks to e-readers like Kindle, they can access their books virtually anywhere at any time.

This problem is especially alarming in the younger generations. While they spend hours in front of screens every day, 1 in 3 U.S. high schoolers did not read a book for pleasure in 2016.<sup>11</sup> Just over forty years ago, in the 1970s, about 60 percent of high school seniors reported reading a book, magazine, or newspaper every day; in 2016 that number had dropped to 16 percent. This follows a trend that “began in the early 1980s and accelerated swiftly after the mid-2000s, when smartphones and high-speed internet access became widely available. At the same time, high-schoolers’ screen time, including television, began to rise—nearly tripling between the late 1970s and the mid-2000s.”<sup>12</sup>

To emphasize the role that digital media has played in this decline in reading amongst teens, researchers noted that, in 2016, 12<sup>th</sup>-graders reported spending 6 hours of their free time on digital media; 10<sup>th</sup>-graders reported an average of 5 hours, and 8<sup>th</sup>-graders reported an average of 4 hours. Further, teens reported that, if given an hour of free time, they would prefer to pick up their devices than a book. In reality, for virtually all ages digital media has largely displaced print media.

This follows a larger trend that has been observed over the past decade: digital media is slowly but surely taking over from print form media as more of our time is spent online, whether it comes to reading, books, academic research, or catching up on the news. Jean Twenge, the author of *iGen: Why Today’s Super-Connected Kids Are Growing Up Less Rebellious, More Tolerant, Less Happy—and Completely Unprepared for Adulthood—and What it Means for the Rest of Us*, finds this highly concerning. “Reading long form texts like books and magazine articles,” she says, “is really important for understanding complex ideas and for developing critical thinking skills.”<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Statistics drawn from metanalysis of the Monitoring the Future Survey by Jean M. Twenge, Gabrielle Martin, and Brian Spitzberg.

<sup>12</sup> Hannah Natanson, “Yes, Teens Are Texting and Using Social Media Instead of Reading Books, Researchers Say,” in *The Washington Post* (August 2018), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/inspired-life/wp/2018/08/20/for-american-teens-texting-and-social-media-are-replacing-books/>.

<sup>13</sup> Quoted in Natanson, “Yes, Teens Are Texting and Using Social Media Instead of Reading Books, Researchers Say.”

Compared with the flashy, fast-paced, mind-numbingly incessant stream of information coming at us from our smartphones, tablets, or computers, books come across as just plain boring. They take more effort, demand more focus and concentration, and do not provide the immediate gratification or the dopamine flood that our screens do. In an economy in which grabbing and keeping our attention is the name of the game, software developers have tools in their arsenal that authors simply do not. Without intentionality on the part of the consumer, the screen will beat the book every single time.

The question must be asked: what are the drawbacks of more time online and less in a book? David Brooks, a columnist for the *New York Times* and professor at Yale University, writes about the impact that digital media has on our attention span versus long-form media. “The slowness of solitary reading or thinking,” he writes,

means you are not as concerned with each individual piece of data. You’re more concerned with how different pieces of data fit together. How does *this* relate to *that*? You’re concerned with the narrative shape, the synthesizing theory, the overall context. You have time to see how one thing layers onto another, producing mixed emotions, ironies, and paradoxes. You have time to lose yourself in another’s complex environment.<sup>14</sup>

Brooks calls this discipline “crystallized intelligence. . . the ability to use experience, knowledge, and the products of lifelong education that have been stored in long-term memory. It is the ability to make analogies and comparisons about things you have studied before. Crystallized intelligence accumulated over the years and leads ultimately to understanding and wisdom.”<sup>15</sup>

Digital media, on the other hand, produces a sort of fluid intelligence, a mental agility in which we engage and then disengage with various bits of information rapidly, getting the gist of each one before moving on. Fluid intelligence enables one to switch between various tasks quickly and to process rapidly presented information. “Fluid intelligence is a set of skills that exist in the moment. It’s the ability to perceive situations and navigate to solutions in novel situations, independent of long experience.”<sup>16</sup>

The fact is, we read print media differently than we read digital media. Reading long-form print media is “less about sensation than about meaning.” It causes it to think more deeply, carefully, and intentionally. This, in turn, trains our minds to ask a different set of questions and to respond more thoughtfully and less emotionally to information. “The fragmentary nature of the inline

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<sup>14</sup> David Brooks, “Building Attention Span,” in *The New York Times* (July 2015), <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/07/10/opinion/david-brooks-building-attention-span.html>.

<sup>15</sup> Brooks, “Building Attention Span.”

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

world,” Tony Reinke writes, “makes this kind of concentration difficult to maintain—all by design.”<sup>17</sup>

David Brooks highlights accumulated wisdom and developed understanding as casualties of the rise of digital media, but they aren’t the only ones. Studies have shown that retention suffers when we read digital media—even if it is the exact same book or article.<sup>18</sup> Why? We have been conditioned to skim digital media, to rapidly sort through information which comes at us so quickly. Retention, however, takes time:

The digital age hurries us and shatters our concentration into a million little pieces, says ethicist Oliver O’Donovan, and now the greatest challenge to literacy is a short attention span, “caught now by one little explosion of surprise, now by another. Knowledge is never actually given to us in that form. It has to be searched for and pursued, as the marvelous poems on Wisdom at the beginning of Proverbs tell us.” And it is always wise to contrast our social-media habits with the disciplined wisdom-seeking habits celebrated in the first three chapters of Proverbs. Our lack of self-control with digital marshmallows malnourishes our sustained linear concentration.<sup>19</sup>

Reinke gets right at the heart of why spending so much of our time in the digital world is dangerous. It weakens the muscles we need to focus on God’s word. It trains us to skim rather than dive deep. It values the new and novel when what we need is the truth of an ancient text. The closing section of his chapter “We Lose Our Literacy” says it best, so we’ll read it together.

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<sup>17</sup> Reinke, *12 Ways Your Phone Is Changing You*, 82.

<sup>18</sup> Rakefet Ackerman and Morris Goldsmith, “Metacognitive Regulation of Text Learning: On Screen versus On Paper,” *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Applied* (March 17, 2011), 18-32.

<sup>19</sup> Reinke, *12 Ways Your Phone Is Changing You*, 84.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 85-88.