

All Teched Out and Nowhere to Go

By Kim Dannies

On the morning of Vermont's Valentine Blizzard '07 I called a colleague to shuffle schedules and learned that he planned to work from bed that day. He reported that there was lots to do, but he couldn't get started until his laptop was fired up and logged on to the internet, a land line phone and cell phone were on his nightstand, along with the TV and DVD/Tivo remotes, and his preferred ipod playlist was cued for mood and motivation. "Cripes," I thought, "Patton positioning troops for the invasion of Normandy would be faster." Whatever happened to a hot cup of coffee and a notepad to get the job done?

I am both baffled by, and guilty of, the current obsession with all things techie. Photoshop, text messages, playlists, YouTube, blogs, IM, Skype phones, updating websites- you name it, everyday I battle the digital tsunami. My objective is no longer a modest desire for simple cost or time saving efficiencies. Nope-it is out of pure terror that I participate. The fear of drowning in the vast ocean of information technology that crashes upon my beachhead a million times a day keeps me (key)stroking.

For example, I love email. But recently I experienced a tipping point moment where I understood that email was driving me and not the other way around. I am suffering from email bankruptcy where the cost of time now outweighs the value of the actual communications. Is there a rehab program for people addicted to that little man who announces "You've got mail?"

Or what about the digital numbing of American manners? I've been snapping friendly pictures of people I know at parties for years without first asking permission. I never gave it a second thought until recently, when I got my head handed to me by an acquaintance that didn't want her reconditioned face shot up close and personal. She scathingly admonished me without any pretense of decorum in front of a large group. Blindsided and humiliated by this new form of Tec etiquette, I behaved badly by emailing the photo, sans my customary Photoshop enhancements, to a select few to enjoy a bit of sport concerning the magnification and assessment of said subject. Is this the new smack down of manners for the 21st century?

I get worse. I recently wore my Burton ipod enhanced hat for hours of bliss on a 'Little Miss Sunshine' styled van trip that included my mother, 3 kids, 2 dogs and husband. My 71-year-old mom couldn't believe her daughter and granddaughters were calm, high and disconnected

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on itunes the whole trip. Mom said, "It was like a 3 hour Mass- no chatting allowed?!" She was incredulous, and she had a right to be. I saw the ipod blitz as an opportunity to indulge my music hobby, chill from the busy holidays, and maintain order. We were accounted for but not present. The reality is that it felt like a lazy cop-out, an artificially sanitized sense of companionship at best. It's ironic how we are superbly connected to the vast riches of the globe yet decreasingly to the treasures sitting right next to us.

I've got some digital input about the health care crisis, too. We could dramatically eliminate anxiety attacks and coronary episodes that spike exponentially when a computer crashes, a digital camera gets ripped off, or the DSL fails, by reducing our investment in and dependence upon these items. When I was a kid, the most valuable possession I was ever in danger of losing was a pocket calculator. Today we causally carry around thousands of dollars of high-end technology on our person without giving it a second thought- that is, until a cell phone, laptop, ipod, or blackberry goes AWOL. Then all hell breaks loose as panic, blood pressure and cortisol stress hormones rise and compound with deep and immediate feelings of abandonment and a visceral disconnect permeates all levels of our physio-psycho-social structure. Can we really manage this sort of burden consistently? It's a major intersection of wealth and luxury working against our health.

Case in point: my daughter lost her phone at college last spring about a week before she was due home. She was adamant that she needed to replace the phone immediately; we counseled her to wait until she returned home. By her reaction, you would have thought we had asked her to abstain from food. She acted like she was in the middle of a jungle instead of a major city, never mind that she had a working land-line phone in her room. The horror of being preternaturally disconnected from her posse 24/7 was too overwhelming a concept for her mind to grasp- and how could we possibly suggest otherwise? When I commented that in my college days we shared a phone at the end of the hall with 32 other students and managed OK, she grew quiet, speaking calmly to me in the way of one who requires doting indulgence because I am about to be committed. (At this point I wisely refrained from sharing childhood memories of 3-way party-lines and five digit telephone numbers.) Indeed, cell phones, ipods, PDA's, PC's, you name it, they may raise productivity, but they're no stress busters.

Did you know that the average American child spends two to three hours a day in front of the

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TV, an additional two hours on a home computer, and seven or eight hours in school? That doesn't include exercise time, which is now technologically directed by PlayStation. My 12-year-old nephew does his daily dancing with the aid of Dance Dance Revolution (DDR) which requires an electronic dance pad, a computer program and a TV, preferably a high definition plasma 42" DCR enhanced screen. Whatever happened to spontaneous neighborhood exercise-games of baseball in the park, tag or sledding? Or, for that matter, developing close childhood friendships outside of the classroom?

Speaking of friendships, people today are friends with everybody on the planet- all they have to do is get "friended" by someone who knows someone else on Facebook, or say hi to anybody on My Space. In their profiles people tell all to the world and document waaay too much via digital images- Hello? TMI! There is no sense of privacy or, as in the olden days, no chance to contemplate a decent faux pas by performing a soul-searching 'walk of shame.' That's all done for us now- electronically- by our pals. We can run but we cannot hide. We are available 24/7 via cell, text, IM, email and YouTube. My friend recently told me about traveling with her daughter to Boston for a cozy shopping overnight. She was quite surprised to awaken at 4:30 am and hear her daughter's voice in conversation. Kristy was out in the hallway yakking away to her boyfriend like it was 4:30 in the afternoon. Is this healthy? Is this necessary? What are these people saying to each other all day and all night long? I'm worried that people no longer have time to absorb, reflect, rest, and grow from their human interactions- they just move on to another one, instantly. Like I said, "Always available, always on, no place to hide."

So in this wild, wild web (www.) frontier what is the ROI for us electronic pioneers? Do we have to settle for greeting our colleagues each morning with a silently mouthed "Hello" because they are wearing the two-headed monster, the wireless headset, and are probably on a call? Will the tradition of mealtime Grace be permanently replaced by a cell phone singing the theme song to Sex and the City? Beeping, ringing, buzzing signals that constantly warn and alert us as they distract from quality time with our loved ones, they all send the same message: we are not really present. This is how technology threatens to outpace our behavior: we're becoming self-contained and indifferent within these technologies. It began with the first telephone call, the ringing phone that took precedence over the live person in the room. We are now at a juncture of such concen-

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trated penetration of access that we are learning to give the impression that manners don't matter, that we don't care about consequences, and that we are not connected emotionally or intellectually. We're in danger of individual isolation, a major contributor of depression, even as the world buzzes around us.

What can we do today about it? Try to live in the real world: take your kids on errands; talk to people wherever you go; go inside the bank, chat with a live grocery checker, pick up your own dry cleaning; exchange a book with the librarian; shop in real stores, linger over lunch or coffee with a friend; make rules about Tec etiquette and enforce them- role model for children and others how to stay connected in real time on as many human levels as possible. This is a copy of the BrainTrust 2006 message and I think it's an apt summary for this BrainStorm:

"We are busier and technically more connected than ever. The flattening of world trade and political barriers, combined with the mind boggling technical advances of the digital revolution, make it possible to do non-stop business with billions of people across the globe. While the potential for innovation is exponential, it is vital to stay connected with our own work/life agenda and with the people who make our efforts mean something. Forget about working harder to 'balance' your life— that high wire act is impossible. Instead, when the world is spinning a little too fast, take time to reconnect with colleagues and loved ones. These are the real-time people who ultimately sustain you. Connection creates balance. "

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