

Jason Espada

Finding Our Way in the New World:
Technology and the Possible Awakening of Human Values

*...somehow you've found your way here,
off the main road, and through a wild land
But look at you!, you look like you haven't eaten
well in months, ragged,
You're hungry. Did you see the fruit trees outside?
and you're thirsty. Did you notice the fresh stream
just a few steps from the path you were on? ...*

{Capturing a moment in time and trying to say anything at all meaningful about it is never an easy thing. This fact doesn't keep people from trying though, even if they are aware of the foolhardy nature of such an attempt. It's a bit like running off a cliff, and aiming into the light. You can't blame a person for trying. What's more interesting even than the show of it, however, is that such an effort has to be pushed by some very strong reason that gives such drive to the legs, and focus to it all. There must be something urgent behind what they are trying to say, or to put it less dramatically, something necessary.

And so, not all that comfortable with the scope of what I'll try to speak of here, but needing so say *something*, for reasons that will become apparent in a moment, I call this, Finding Our Way in the New World. }

In conversations with friends the last few months one theme that has come up again and again is the challenge of finding meaning, depth and satisfaction with the ever increasing range of choices that are becoming available. To guide my own thinking, I used to tell myself that 'more is only more if we can appreciate it', but I found that this doesn't go far enough. Now, when it comes to art, music, literature, movies and so on, the thought I have is that - more only more if we are *nourished* by it.

The sharp irony of having so much more available is that, instead of bringing more satisfaction, it often leads to people not really going deeply into anything at all, and not being fed by what they do choose. I notice this especially in younger people – those in their teens and twenties. There is a sort of restless dissatisfaction to them – their minds skip from one thing to another, like a stone skimming the water.

There are some people who, believe it or not, are not moved by anything, not by art, history, stories of heroic triumph, science, philosophy, political events, poetry or literature. The tragedy, of course, is that we have more available to us now than ever before. The world is opening up, and treasures are within reach like never before, so why aren't we showing signs of being ever more in love?

Something strange is going on, when, instead of being more grateful, more filled with wonder and in love with life itself, people are actually more jaded and numb, feeling even more dissatisfied, disrespectful, and without hope. It's like a fork in the road was missed a ways back and the further some people travel the further they get from where they thought they were headed.

Here's my own take on what's going on: at least part of it, I think, has to do with how people are using their attention. This is, after all, the age of multi-tasking. Some would say it is an age of ADHD – attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. Without enough focus, whatever we are doing will be less clear, and less benefit will be gained than if we learned to bring more of our attention to whatever we are doing.

I try to remind myself that we are in motion in time, and that if we've gone in some direction that doesn't serve our interests, then that will only get worse if we don't see it for what it is and adjust. It's hard to imagine, but I do try to think of ten or twenty years from now, and how people's minds will be if we keep increasing the restlessness and the distractions. Some amount of multi-tasking can be fine, as long as we can also uni-task when it's in our best interest. Without that ability, we just become scattered and unable to really enter fully into anything at all.

I think there is a deeper reason though for the widespread dissatisfaction in our culture, and that is that we live in a materialistic, consumer society. This is something of our state religion, or the dominant world religion at this

time, if you define religion as what people rely on as the basis for their happiness.

The key idea of materialistic culture is that we are bodies, or body-minds, and that taking care of this level of our existence is all we need to do to bring fulfillment. The notion of the inner life of a human being never enters into it. As one teacher put it when speaking of capitalists, or people who are just looking to make a profit off of you: ‘Beware!, these people are not interested in your soul.’

A consumer society is a hard place for the human soul. We have to struggle to keep from feeling overwhelmed, or isolated, and make an even greater effort if we are to thrive here. But if in fact we do have an inner life, and if in fact it is by far the greater part of who we are, then taking care of this inner life is exactly what we need. If we want health, happiness, and meaning, we have to look for the conditions that really do support these.

The documentary *The Century of the Self*, produced by the BBC in 2002 (and available for viewing online) describes how the public relations industry developed in the last century, both to convince people to buy things they didn’t need, and also as a means of social control. Nefarious stuff, stimulating greed, dissatisfaction, jealousy and arrogance, and breeding fear.

Where can we turn, then, in this media saturated culture, for some clarity about what could help our inner life? Obviously, one of the first things we can do is turn off the tv. Or tune in much more selectively. Then, as Rumi says, ‘look for a generous teacher, one who’s absorbed in the tradition he’s in’.

If we want to learn pottery, we go one place, and if we want to learn to swim, we go to another. Who carries light these days? Who do you know who shows the signs that their inner life is thriving? I would say that poets carry this light, and artists, and people with a social conscience, such as Greg Mortenson, the author of *Three Cups of Tea*, and Dr. Paul Farmer, as well as the journalists Naomi Klein and Naomi Wolfe.

There are meditation teachers also who I think of as bearers of light: Alan Wallace, Matthieu Ricard, Ani Tenzin Palmo, Lama Yeshe and Thich Nhat Hanh come to mind here. Make your own list.

In all cases, whether they be teacher, poet, artist or social activist, we should check them out thoroughly before deciding if they are someone we would want to emulate.

There is a pivotal scene in the book *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, where the author remembers one of his teachers asking him, 'Are you teaching quality?' This seems to be one key to getting beyond the surface and finding what nourishes us – to learn to focus on the quality of things as they reach our ear, our mind, our heart.

Here are two related quotes I found recently that connect these thoughts, about nourishing the inner life, with where we are now, in this Newly Emerging World. The first is from Alan Wallace, a very fine Buddhist teacher who has recently posted scores of his meditation talks online. He commented: 'To an unprecedented degree in human history, we are now exposed to diversity.'

Think about that for a moment. Never before have so many people been able to know about so much – isn't that amazing? - and the amount that is becoming available will only increase, that much is certain. It begs the question, then: What new skill will we need to be able to actually benefit from all this? How will we be able to tell what is worthwhile without being overwhelmed by it all? Even asking the question is a first step. I'm sure I'm not the only person thinking along these lines. Right now, I'm sure that many others are asking the same questions, seeing that, as time goes on, new abilities to discriminate between the worthwhile and the bullshit will become more and more necessary.

The second quote is from an article in last Sunday's *New York Times Magazine*, by one Joshua Foer: 'Today, we read books 'extensively', often without sustained focus, and with rare exceptions we read each book only once. We value quantity of reading over quality of reading. We have no choice, if we want to keep up with the broader culture...' This seems to be the common view, doesn't it? – to keep expanding our range as more information is available. But what will happen when there is ten times or a hundred times as much? At some point, there is no way we will be able to keep up, and, like the person who doesn't eat a full meal because there are too many choices, following this pattern, we'll even miss out on what we could have learned from. We'll just be overwhelmed.

An interesting thing happens, however, when we are nourished, when we take the time to be with things deeply, and that is that our capacity increases. We don't get more capacity by spreading ourselves thin, contrary to what may look sensible. We get it by growing in our soul, in our inner life.

The reason I cited poets and artists as people who live deeply and often embody joy is that these are people we can learn from about the inner life. The poet Pablo Neruda wrote four collections published in English with the title, 'Odes to Common Things'. In these poems he shows us an entirely different way of engaging the world, taking the time to be with things with reverence, with tenderness, and with delight at every turn. He writes:

*'...I pause in houses,
streets and
elevators
touching things,
identifying objects
that I secretly covet;
this one because it rings,
that one because
it's as soft
as the softness of a woman's hip,
that one there for its deep-sea color,
and that one for its velvet feel...*

and, in Ode to the Dictionary:

*'...How wonderful
to read in your columns
ancestral
words,
the severe and
long-forgotten
maxim,
daughter of Spain,
petrified
as a plow blade,
as limited in use*

as an antiquated tool,

*but preserved
in the precise beauty and
immutability of a medallion...'*

Such life and richness!

In a recent 60 Minutes interview, here is what the trumpeter and teacher Wynton Marsallis said, about the importance of art and learning from those who have come before us: 'The arts are our collective human heritage. You're a better person if you know what Shakespeare was talking about, if you know what Beethoven struggled with, if you know about Matisse; if you know what Louis Armstrong actually is saying through his horn – you're better, because, it's just like, you get to speak with the wisest people who ever lived.'

Last month I discovered Carlos Roldan, a guitarist from Argentina, and last year I found the extraordinary singer Eva Cassidy, the Bach Suites played by a harpist named Victoria Drake, and the writer Edward Said. It will surely continue this way for me. If we have a mind to look, then, without a doubt, we will find treasures such as these.

Suddenly, it seems, we have access now, as never before, to all kinds of information, knowledge, art, amusements. But what will we value enough to give it our time? Especially in a commercial culture there is the danger that what has actual value for us will be drowned out by ads and distractions, so, now more than ever, care is needed, and then well taught mentors, for the next generation.

One more piece, for the sake of completeness has to be said here, and that is that fulfillment doesn't only come from enhancing and enriching our own life (exactly contrary to what advertisements will tell you). We live in a world with 7 billion other people, and other species besides our own, and we are very much related, on many levels. This is not something that is usually taught, although I think it should be, especially now. Our own happiness depends on living with respect for others, with a sense of responsibility, and on doing what we can for them. This is mature happiness. It's certainly not the kind that is sold, almost exclusively to Americans, and worldwide also.

This is also where the new means available to us, to learn, to connect, and to interact takes on tremendous value. Not only can we find out about things, places, people, events, but we can respond to needs like never before. We can organize and create new ways to get things done.

I'm thinking here of one organization called Kiva, located here in San Francisco. Kiva facilitates micro loans, based on the work of the Nobel Prize winning economist Muhammad Yunus and the Grameen Bank. A very high percentage of the loans are repaid in part because the whole community feels a sense of responsibility, and they know that if a loan is repaid then more capital can be made available to them. (contrast this with the 'every man for himself' style of capitalism, that is now in its death throes here in America and elsewhere). The beauty of models such as that developed by Mr. Yunus, besides the great help they offer to people, is that they bypass almost all of the middle-men, whose main function in the past was to collect fees and to do little more. These are exciting times.

The author Paul Hawken has one book called 'Blessed Unrest' that talks about social movements happening independently, all over the world, from the grassroots level. One brand new possibility is for people in any country, with a few keystrokes, to identify and to support movements that are working to turn ideals into reality. For example, I support Buy-A-Net, (buyanet.ca) which is an organization based in Canada that's been part of an effective movement these last few years to reduce malaria by providing treated mosquito nets, at a very low cost (about \$6.00 per net, and about \$250 to 'net a whole village').

If we look for them, we are sure to find many positive ideas being acted on that had never occurred to us. We can learn from each other, be inspired by to do something of real, human value for each other like never before. This is one possibility.

Of course the other possibility is there too – that we will just use our new advantages to do much more of the same – to bring more isolation, more indulgence, more self-centeredness, and more waste (the shadow side of Western Culture)... I'm not sure yet which way we will go, as there is so much here that would resist any serious self-reflection or change in world view. I mean, we still spend billions on cosmetics and sports,

porn and alcohol, trash novels and so-called ‘reality’ tv... but still... I am optimistic. I need to remind myself that any time you bring a new variable into some equation, then, all bets are off, as we say. At that point, you can’t predict what will happen based on the past. It’s a new day.

For example, it almost goes without saying that modern politics is all about using technology to control people. They control with fear, and by limiting the message. I’ve come to expect this of politicians. It’s clear to myself, and to many other people by now that we need a different caliber of person in politics, if we are ever going to become an actual representative democracy. (a ‘Poet’s Party’ anyone? with Presidential debates in verse?)

Given our new range of choices, until there is a real difference in the kind of person running for office, people like myself will simply tune out professional politicians. And we will turn away from a mainstream media also that just is just being used to produce feelings of pessimism, powerlessness and despair (interspersed, of course, with inane commercials, stupefying entertainments, some shallow excitement, and spectacle).

Come to think of it, in a way, without intending it, the mainstream media, and those who control content have actually done some of us a great service. They have forced us to look elsewhere (like the former Huffington Post, Commondreams, and Truthout) for intelligent, passionate social advocacy. I’m encouraged by the thought that, all over the world right now, educated people are learning from and are in conversation with other highly educated, committed people. This is an utterly modern form of exponential change, in the most productive, positive sense.

So how can we tell if technology is helping us to awaken our better natures, or if it is holding us back? It’s an individual matter, for sure. We’ll have to watch ourselves and see, but here are some general markers that we can look for: If we become leaden, or scattered, overwhelmed, unable to receive nourishment from beauty; cut off from life; inwardly poor, and ‘tapped out’, and less in control, then, know that the new technology, as you are using it, is not working for you. Find another way.

On the other hand, if the world is getting to be more interesting, more rich and beautiful for you day by day (this sounds a lot like being in love,

I know) and if you feel you are becoming more flexible, nimble, able to receive nourishment from what's around you; engaged with life, inwardly rich, grateful, inspired, more confident, aware of more choices, and more in control of your life, then it's working. ... Share the joy!

What has been here all along can now be known more fully than ever - the arts, our history - 'this house we were born into', and our own resources. If we make the best use of this time, and these opportunities, then there is no limit to the benefit that can come of it. The possibilities for ourselves, our immediate and greater family, and for this earth extend, even as far as our ability to dream.