

*Sunday September 1, 2013*

## **Distracting ourselves to death**

By Jim Taylor

A “typical” Canadian family – father, mother, and 1.9 children (the current average, according to Statistics Canada), -- gathers around a picnic table beside a clear mountain lake. Instead of enjoying the scenery, they’re all peering into their cellphones or iPads.

A couple sit at dinner. Candlelight. Wine. Soft music. While they talk, he texts a message to some distant colleague.

A family lines up at the airport check-in on their way to a dream vacation on a Caribbean island. Their teenaged daughter is exploring FaceBook. “Eww, that’s gross!” she exclaims, and searches for something even grosser.

Why do we feel we can’t do anything without also doing something else at the same time?

## **Consequences of distractions**

A jogger trots along a sidewalk. Wires from an audio device on her belt lead to her ears. So that she can listen to music, news, or self-improvement lectures, while she runs.

A driver pulls out into a teeming intersection. He has a cell phone glued to his left ear. His arm prevents him from seeing the oncoming truck.

Crash!

Without breaking stride, the jogger launches across an intersection. She doesn’t hear the car coming up behind her.

Smash!

Why can’t we just drive, or jog, or walk, or talk, without simultaneously needing to connect to some alternate reality?

In one sense, I suppose, multitasking has been around forever. I may not be consciously aware of overhearing the conversation at the next table, of the smell of bread baking, of the sun on my shoulders. But I am, even though I’m engrossed in a crossword puzzle.

## **Merging time and space**

At the same time, though, modern technology enables us to multitask in ways that were previously impossible. I can cook supper, while talking to an acquaintance in Singapore, while listening to a man who died 30 years ago play the music of a composer who died 230 years earlier (Glenn Gould playing Bach).

Technology lets us triumph over both time and space. So why wouldn’t we use it?

Because it’s inefficient, that’s why. A university experiment used students as test subjects. One group set aside all extraneous equipment and programs. Another was encouraged to multitask. At anything they chose. Then they were tested to see which group better absorbed the content of the class.

To no one’s surprise, the multitaskers performed much more poorly than the single-taskers. But to everyone’s surprise, so did another group – the single-taskers sitting near a multitasker. Because they too were being distracted from their task.

And as driving statistics prove, distractions can also be dangerous.

According to the latest studies I could find, cell phone usage has now surpassed alcohol as the major cause of car accidents. In the U.S., the Virginia Tech Transportation Institute claimed that drivers texting are 23 times more likely to be involved in a crash, or near-crash, than non-distracted drivers!

More conservatively, Alberta estimates that distracted drivers are merely three times more likely to be in a crash than attentive drivers.

## **Moving faster**

But distractions don't affect just drivers. A jogger in White Rock managed to get hit by an Amtrak train. Preliminary reports suggested she might not have heard it coming, because she had earbuds plugged in.

The same happened to another jogger in Haverstraw, New York. Witnesses noted that the runner failed to react even though the train engineer sounded his horn multiple times.

Perhaps we've always been prone to distraction. A burning bush distracted Moses from herding his father-in-law's goats. Poet Thomas Gray got distracted by mouldering tombstones in a country churchyard. Isaac Newton got distracted by a falling apple.

But perhaps we could afford to get distracted, when the world moved at a walking pace.

If you look away for a second or two while walking, you're hardly likely to run into a brick wall that wasn't there the last time you looked. If you look away for the same length of time while driving, you'll have covered at least 15 metres, about 50 feet. Far enough to have missed seeing that pothole. That pedestrian. That child.

## **Making deliberate choices**

So every Canadian province now has legislation against driving while distracted – although the laws vary in their severity and scope.

Distracted driving doesn't refer just to using a cell phone. It could also mean adjusting the radio or air-conditioning. Putting on lipstick. Touching up a shave. Checking a map. Retrieving a child's toy; according to yet another study, child passengers tend to be twice as distracting as adult passengers.

The fact that we have these laws suggests that we may have come to a tiny but significant turning point in history. Perhaps, for the first time, we are requiring humans not to pay attention to every available input. We must choose.

For the first time, our society may be recognizing the principle that just because technological progress makes something possible, doing it is not necessarily wise.

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## **YOUR TURN**

May I throw in an additional few words about my conversations with Judy Peterson, over her daughter Lindsey's 20-year disappearance? The most painful thing, for me, was hearing the tone of resignation in Judy's voice. She hasn't quit trying. She will spend the rest of her life trying to find Lindsey, or some trace of Lindsey. And others, like Lindsey. It's a matter of justice, now, for everyone. But in her voice I heard some despair. I almost sense that she's given up hope, both for her daughter, and for our system of governance.

Maureen Crawford wrote, "I found this quite interesting, and disappointing."

Charles Hill, currently living in Texas, wondered, "Are you sure that Judy isn't dealing with the US Legislature? It's the age-old question. When do the needs of the many over-ride the needs of the few? Besides, if Canada is like the US, the money is needed to build a super highway to deliver drugs from Mexico -- never mind that railroads are much more economical and fuel efficient. Hail Kafka!"

Steve Lawson reflected on the prophets of our times, such as Franz Kafka: "Maybe we should create a 20th century updated and relevant bible filled with those who describe future times in our society. Kafka and Orwell would be some of the leading prophets with their observations of the times to come (much of what they say is already here) and dare I say, Dan Brown and Deepak Chopra (The Third Jesus) would be some of the minor prophets leading the way of thinkers for their time and ours into the future...."

I'm not the only one who finds some inspiration and insight in Kafka, apparently. Bob Walker sent along a sermon he preached not very long ago that took its theme from Kafka.

My reference to actions that "might infringe someone's right to privacy" hooked Bob Warrick in Australia.

"We live in a 67 floor tower block and for a while the injunction that nothing was to be thrown over the balcony was supplemented by the threat that '24 CCTV is in operation.' Now we have been told that the cameras have been turned off because 'they might intrude on someone's privacy'. What sort of privacy comes into play with cameras looking up the building escapes me...but the protection afforded by cameras recording infringements is no more!"

Isabel Gibson commented, "It's sometimes hard to believe that we live in a system of government that is better than all the others that have been tried" (quoting Winston Churchill, I think).

Jim Vickers thought I should post the column on FaceBook. So it could "go viral," I suppose. He deserves an explanation of why I'm not on FaceBook. I did try it, at a friend's urging. I found that I was getting deluged with random quasi-thoughts from everyone, but getting very few intelligent responses to my own. It also took up abominable amounts of time. So I quit. Perhaps I'm missing something, but I get far more out of the more limited interchanges that occur in this forum by e-mail.

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#### TECHNICAL STUFF

This column comes to you using the electronic facilities of Woodlakebooks.com.

If you want to comment on something, send a message directly to me, at [jimt@quixotic.ca](mailto:jimt@quixotic.ca).

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You can access several years of archived columns at <http://edges.Canadahomepage.net>.

I write a second column each Wednesday, called Soft Edges, which deals somewhat more gently with issues of life and faith. To sign up for Soft Edges, write to me directly, at the address above, or send a note to [softedges-subscribe@quixotic.ca](mailto:softedges-subscribe@quixotic.ca)

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#### PROMOTION STUFF...

If you know someone else who might like to receive this column regularly via e-mail, send a request to [jimt@quixotic.ca](mailto:jimt@quixotic.ca). Or, if you wish, forward them a copy of this column. But please put your name on it, so they don't think I'm sending out spam.

For other sources worth pursuing, try

- Ralph Milton's HymnSight webpage, <http://www.hymnsight.ca>, with a vast gallery of photos you can use to enhance the appearance of the visual images you project for liturgical use (prayers, responses, hymn verses, etc.)
- David Keating's "SeemslkeGod" page, [www.seemslkegod.org](http://www.seemslkegod.org);
- Alan Reynold's weekly musings, punningly titled "Reynolds Rap" -- [reynoldsrap@shaw.ca](mailto:reynoldsrap@shaw.ca)
- Isobel Gibson's thoughtful and well-written blog, [www.traditionaliconoclast.com](http://www.traditionaliconoclast.com)
- Wayne Irwin's "Churchweb Canada," an inexpensive service for any congregation wanting to develop a web presence, with free consultation. <http://www.churchwebcanada.ca>
- Alva Wood's satiric stories about incompetent bureaucrats and prejudiced attitudes in a small town are not particularly religious, but they are fun; write [alvawood@gmail.com](mailto:alvawood@gmail.com) to get onto her mailing list.

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