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Part of a Balanced Breakfast: Three Steps to Restore Balance in our Digital World

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Abstract

"New research, articles, and books seem to come out weekly showing strong links between skyrocketing depression levels and screen time."

Posting about moderation in our use of digital technology from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

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in things

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Mark Volkers

When I was a kid—long before I was savvy to the ways of advertising and wordsmithing—I would watch Saturday morning cartoons and wonder. I distinctly remember commercials coming on for breakfast cereals with names like Count Chocula, Cinnamon MiniBuns, Smurf Magic Berries, Apple Jacks, Fruity Pebbles, Lucky Charms, and more. Even I could tell that they were crunchy little sugar bombs that probably weren't good for me, but without fail, each commercial ended with a picture of the cereal surrounded by orange juice, toast, fruit, and the announcer saying, "...part of a balanced breakfast."

Balanced? How could something so sugary, so empty, be part of a balanced breakfast? "Remove that cereal," I thought, "and balance will be restored."

Over time, most of us have learned how to see through the smokescreens of commercials, read between the lines, and come to our own conclusions about cereal ads, car salespersons, political promises, and slick peddlers of a cheap gospel.

Now at the dawn of a new decade in a relatively new century, most of us have moved beyond the sugary cereals, but now I wonder about our ability to see beyond the promises of all those amazing apps and devices that keep coming our way. They don't promise us a balanced breakfast, but they do promise us increased productivity, free entertainment, better communication, and lives enhanced in so many ways that it's almost breathtaking. A quick Google search for new apps brings up names like: 1Gallery,

bethere, Cometin, EdLock, Disney+, Muscle Booster, LumaFusion, BabySitMe, Farming Simulator, and the list goes on and on and on.

This article is not an attempt to bash technology or advocate that we all become like the Amish and throw away our technology. Nope. It is too useful and wonderful. But I do want us to consider the false promises in those “balanced breakfast” ads and the false assumptions our culture seems to have adapted that all this technology is making us better.

Is it?

New research, articles, and books seem to come out weekly showing strong links between skyrocketing depression levels and screen time. Loneliness is epidemic and studies suggest a strong correlation with the use of technology. You can do your own searching to find the studies, but with all that in mind, I would like to suggest three simple steps anyone can take as we enter 2020, to bring some digital balance back into our lives:

1. Being Intentional with our Use of Technology

A week ago, I spent a total of 16 hours waiting around in various airports. With that much time to wander, I observed people hunched over their phones, sometimes for hours. It was pretty easy to see what they were doing and honestly—they weren’t doing much. One guy spent several minutes just tapping apps open and shut and sliding between screens on his iPhone. One young mother went up and down her Facebook feed time and time again, looking at the same things over and over. Numb faces peered at Instagram for long stretches at a time. This isn’t isolated to just waiting at airports. It happens in class too. During class—which students pay for—I sometimes see them scrolling endlessly through some app, while excellent discussion is happening all around them.

Intentional use of technology means we acknowledge its importance and usefulness, but we take it out at certain times—and for certain reasons. It sounds pretty radical, but this would mean we no longer just take the phone out through muscle memory or because we are walking down a hall and “need” to look at something. We take it out to make a call, to send a text, or for a predetermined award after completing a set period of study or exercise. Then we put it away and take part in the world all around us. It means we don’t open YouTube, and consequently spend 45 minutes looking at ... whatever. It means we go to YouTube for a specific reason, then get out.

2. Choosing Facetime over Screentime

We've all seen the young family or friend group at the local restaurant with each person buried in a phone or tablet and no one speaking. Students regularly admit that they take the phone out when walking across campus or down the hall, because it means they don't have to make eye contact with others. Again, radical as it may sound, making an intentional decision to keep the device down when others are present will help us regain balance in our lives in this digital age. "Communication," "community," and "commune" all share a common origin; it has to do with sharing, commonality, and making something common. Our digital devices can definitely help us communicate—but they don't help us build community or commonality with the people right around us. An intentional decision to have all screens off—including the TV—during mealtime, should be the absolute starting point. Choosing restaurants that don't have TV's hanging on the walls should also be a priority. When others are present—at table, in class, walking through hallways, in the living room—devices should be put away. We build community by being present with others, not by looking down and engaging in mediated communication.

3. Annual Media Fast

Each year, my students and I take part in a three-day media fast. When the alarm goes off on Tuesday morning (and the alarm needs to be set to the buzzer, not music), until 11:59pm on Thursday, we work hard to not touch any social media, not watch TV or Netflix, the radio in the car stays off, no earbuds, no surfing the web, and no YouTube. We play board games, read books, go for walks, and spend time in the Word while listening for the still, small Voice that gets lost in all the media. It's transformative. When students write about it the following week, they regularly write about restored relationships, getting caught up on homework, getting back to writing music or poetry—sometimes for the first time in years! An annual media fast is a reset button for our digital habits. It reminds us that there are so many other good things going on and we don't actually need to park ourselves in front of screens so much.

I love technology. I love sugary cereals. But I now know Lucky Charms is not part of a balanced breakfast. I can enjoy a bowl full now and then, but only in moderation.

When we take control of our digital devices and put limits on our media time, we're restoring balance to our lives. Good things—in moderation—continue to be good things. But those same good things—left unchecked—quickly become destructive forces in our lives.