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The Push of a Button: Replacing Meaningful Interactions

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The Push of a Button: Replacing Meaningful Interactions

Abstract

"Is there a worthy end goal that justifies the use of efficient means, or are we just hurrying for the sake of it?"

Posting about examining our fast-paced lives 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.

<https://inallthings.org/the-push-of-a-button-replacing-meaningful-interactions/>

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Comments

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The Push of a Button: Replacing Meaningful Interactions

Kevin Timmer

January 13, 2022

We live in a convenience-based culture and are blessed by the many opportunities and comforts it affords. Our food comes from a drive-thru window, our water from a faucet, our clothes come from an Amazon box, our dishes are washed by a machine, our math coach is YouTube, robots vacuum our floors, and the list goes on and on. Convenience brings tradeoffs, making some things possible while making other things more difficult.¹ One such tradeoff impacts the meaningfulness we experience in our relationships.

God loves us and creates us for a purpose: to glorify Him by living out His love for us through our love and care of others. God is relational and so are we. Kevin Brown, in *Designed for Good: Recovering the Idea, Language, and Practice of Virtue*, suggests that we are created for virtue. Brown explains, “Virtue and goodness are not first about rules but about loving what is good....I submit that it is our very humanity. It is fulfillment, significance, and meaning; it is being who we were created to be. Properly ordered love is not simply about our lives becoming better; it is about being able to become whole.”² We are created to make choices that reflect God’s love to others, to bear His image after the example of His perfect image bearer, Jesus Christ (Col 1:15). Brown puts it this way: “The more we are like Christ, the more we fulfill our original design—the ‘perfect version of ourselves.’”³ Therefore, in the pattern of Christ, we are called to sacrificial service, placing others ahead of ourselves. Christ-like sacrificial love and care for each other knits us together in community.

Done righteously, this interdependence allows us to see and experience the presence of Christ in others, and they in us, as we become the hands and feet of Christ. The meaningfulness we experience in our lives and our sense of purpose has less to do with note-worthy accomplishments and more to do with living into our God-given identity, giving of ourselves through ordinary, day-to-day acts of service. Christian community, whether in the context of the family, the church, or the neighborhood, relies on believers being mutually dependent on each other—working together, sacrificially supporting one another, each contributing from their gifts. Tragically, the culture that surrounds the church in North America, for all intents and purposes, rejects the notion of dependence on God and others, instead glorifying individual autonomy, putting self-fulfillment ahead of the needs of others. Kevin Brown draws a stark contrast between virtue and autonomy:

“Autonomy values freedom and liberty from others, but virtue extols freedom for the sake of others. Autonomy prizes choice for its own sake, but virtue aims to link our desire to the truly desirable. Autonomy sees others as a constraint, but virtue recognizes our relational commitments as a source of fulfillment. Autonomy says that I raise myself, make myself, and save myself—but virtue realizes that how I function is aimless, worthless, and harmful when disconnected from human teleology (our design).” ⁴

I teach engineering at a Christian university, and I am not always comfortable being a champion of technology as it is currently expressed in the surrounding culture. Technologies reflect and reinforce the priorities of the creators. For example, some cars are safer to drive than others because of the differences in the priorities of the designers (and the companies) involved. This is true when we consider whole cultures as well. Cultures that value individual autonomy will tend to produce products aimed at delivering a feeling of independence. Enter *convenience*: a quality or situation that makes something easy or useful for *someone* by reducing the amount of work or time required to do something. ⁵ Technologies of convenience are designed to benefit the user by reducing the amount of time or work they need to commit to a task. Did you catch that? Convenience-based technologies benefit me by reducing the time and effort I must commit to tasks and therefore to those I serve.

This sounds completely antithetical to our God given purpose of being sacrificially committed to the wellbeing of others, but convenience has its place. While technologies of convenience tend to trivialize the task, and therefore also the relationship involved, I think we can make some initial progress by trying to assess what we are trading away when we choose convenience in a particular situation. Washing dishes provides leisure time for conversation and interaction with a family member who is drying the dishes or clearing the table. By pushing the start button on the dishwasher instead, this time is traded in favor of convenience.

While there is much to be considered on this topic, practicing discernment in choosing when to replace personal interactions with technologies of convenience is an important place to begin. The accumulative effect of relying on many technologies of convenience works against meaningful relationships; however, the context of the choice makes a difference regarding what is appropriate. A person living alone does not compromise any personal relationships (other than with his own taste buds) by relying on a quick microwaved meal. However, doing the same in a family situation does potentially sacrifice opportunities for family members to serve each other by working and learning together as they achieve a common goal. I am not suggesting that efficient meal prep is necessarily wrong, but we should ask why we are striving to save time and effort in the first place. For families, mealtimes should be about much more than just caloric intake. Is there a worthy end goal that justifies the use of efficient means, or are we just hurrying for the sake of it? It is good to remember that a trade is always made.

I recall raking leaves with my dad in the fall when I was a kid. We lived on seven acres in the country with lots of trees. Convenience and efficiency would have mandated sucking up all

those leaves with a riding lawn mower and pull-behind trailer—we raked them by hand. I won't tell you that it was fun; it was hard work and I usually ended up with at least a couple blisters on each hand. However, looking back, I now see that there was more to this ritual than just removing the dead leaves from the yard. It was time spent serving side-by-side with my dad, winning his approval as I stuck to the task, and sharing in the satisfaction of its completion. He needed me, and my contribution mattered to achieving the overall goal. I learned the importance of approaching a large task in an organized fashion and that huge jobs are manageable if you break them down into smaller sections. We raked the leaves to our gravel driveway where we burned them, and I discovered our shared love of playing with fire—my dad liked playing with fire just as much as me. It was not a zero-sum game. I learned a lot about myself and my dad during those two or three Saturdays each fall. A leaf-sucking lawn mower would have been much faster, but the value of time spent together filled a deeper need of living in community.

God intends that we lovingly serve, be responsible for, and meaningfully contribute to the well-being of others.⁶ Cultural roots form bias for technologies of convenience in ways that tend to undermine community and the meaningfulness gained in relationships. Common tasks requiring time, responsibility, and commitment to others are automated, replacing our reliance on community with technological dependence. Convenience can quickly and efficiently move us through the day-to-day, untethering us from the inconvenience of attending to others, and freeing us to do what we want. However, when we step away from opportunities to serve each other, we step away from our God-given identity, and we can begin to feel a lack of meaning in our lives. We need to wisely weigh the cost of convenience. Is the price always worth it?

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1. Andy Crouch, *Culture Making: Recovering Our Creative Calling*, InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL, 2008, p. 29 – 30.
 2. Kevin Brown, *Designed for Good: Recovering the Ideas, Language, and Practice of Virtue*, Hendrickson Publishers, Peabody, MA, 2016, p. 95.
 3. Brown, p. 112.
 4. Brown, p. 142.
 5. Merriam-Webster.com, the essential meaning of convenience: 1.

6. “I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.” (Romans 12:1-2, NRSV)