

Allen Avenue Unitarian Universalist Church
May 29, by the Service Committee
COMMUNICATION IN THE TECHNOLOGY AGE

Preview www.youtube.com/watch?v=IB95KLmpLR4

OPENING WORDS

Excerpt from *On the Net*, a column in *Asimov's* magazine, by James Patrick Kelly
(January 2011 issue)

“Whenever a new and revolutionary information technology appears, naysayers always swarm. Television? Yes. Radio? Check. Newspapers? Right. Gutenberg and his printing press? Absolutely. Scrolls?

Yes, even handwritten manuscripts – the primordial book technology at the foundation of our world culture – had critics. Consider this:

“... for this discovery of yours will create forgetfulness in the learners' souls, because they will not use their memories; they will trust to the external written characters and not remember of themselves. The specific which you have discovered is an aid not to memory, but to reminiscence, and you give your disciples not truth, but only the semblance of truth; they will be hearers of many things and will have learned nothing; they will appear to be omniscient and will generally know nothing; they will be tiresome company, having the show of wisdom without the reality.”

The speaker here is none other than Socrates, as imagined by Plato and translated by Benjamin Joewtt. His dialogue *Phadrus* was written in 360 B.C.E.”

LESSON FOR ALL AGES - Excerpt from *Alice Through the Looking Glass* by Lewis Carroll, read by Michael Crosby

This little story is a very small piece of a big story about a small girl in a big and confusing world that in a small way is like the big world that we live in. The girl's name is Alice and one day the mirror in her living room went all magic and she was able to push herself through the mirror into the room that she could see in the mirror from her living room. The room was just like the room that Alice had just left only everything was backwards. Alice went out into the garden where she met some talking flowers who said that there was a real Queen in the garden but that she could only meet the Queen by walking away from her. Alice did what the flowers told her to do and she bumped right into the Queen. They said hello and then, well,

“Alice never could quite make out, in thinking it over afterwards, how it was that they began: all she remembers is, that they were running hand in hand, and the Queen went so fast that it was all she could do to keep up with her: and still the Queen kept crying ‘Faster! Faster!’ but Alice felt she *could not* go faster, thought she had not breath left to say so.

The most curious part of the thing was, that the trees and the other things round them never changed their places at all: however fast they went, they never seemed to pass anything. 'I wonder if all the things move along with us?' thought poor puzzled Alice. And the Queen seemed to guess her thoughts, for she cried, 'Faster! Don't try to talk!' Not that Alice had any idea of doing *that*. She felt as if she would never be able to talk again, she was getting so much out of breath: and still the Queen cried 'Faster! Faster!' and dragged her along. 'Are we nearly there?' Alice managed to pant out at last. 'Nearly there!' the Queen repeated. 'Why, we passed it ten minutes ago! Faster!' And they ran on for a time in silence, with the wind whistling in Alice's ears, and almost blowing her hair off her head, she fancied.

'Now! Now!' cried the Queen. 'Faster! Faster!' And they went so fast that at last they seemed to skim through the air, hardly touching the ground with their feet, till suddenly, just as Alice was getting quite exhausted, they stopped, and she found herself sitting on the ground, breathless and giddy. The Queen propped her up against a tree, and said kindly, 'You may rest a little now.' Alice looked round her in great surprise. 'Why, I do believe we've been under this tree the whole time! Everything's just as it was!' 'Of course it is,' said the Queen, 'what would you have it?' 'Well, in *our* country,' said Alice, still panting a little, 'you'd generally get to somewhere else -- if you ran very fast for a long time, as we've been doing.' 'A slow sort of country!' said the Queen. 'Now, *here*, you see, it takes all the running *you* can do, to keep in the same place. If you want to get somewhere else, you must run at least twice as fast as that!'"

Have you ever run really, really fast and never gotten any where? Perhaps you will when you get older. It's one of the life skills that they teach you in school. Right now, lets Walk s l o w l y out to your programs while the grownups sing you this pretty song that you may have heard before.

REFLECTION – “Once More through the Looking Glass” by Michael Crosby

The internet, cell-phones, i-pods and Blackberries; this is how we communicate today. It's so wonderfully quick and convenient, instantaneous communication available anywhere, twenty-four hours a day giving us, as the ad said, total freedom! I cannot agree. In my opinion, there are some serious downsides to the wonders of mass communication.

For one thing, if people can call you anywhere at any time, it seems more like slavery than freedom. Civility seems to have suffered in this connected world. If I were on a fishing trip in the wilderness and my fishing partner was arranging and closing real estate deals by cell phone while we were fishing, I would be deeply offended.

A real concern for me is that the wonders of the internet seem to be having a detrimental effect on our capacity for deep thinking and even reading. I spoke with an high school English teacher who said that she has seen a serious drop in reading ability in the last fifteen years. High school juniors read Nathaniel Hawthorns The Scarlet Letter but lately she has had students coming to her in tears because they say that by the time they get to the end of a long sentence, they couldn't remember the beginning of the sentence.

The author Nicholas Carr wrote in a recent article in The Atlantic “ The net seems to be chipping away at my capacity for concentration and contemplation. When I mention my troubles to friends - literary types, most of them - many are having similar experiences, saying that the more they use the web, the more they have to fight to stay focused on long pieces of writing. One says “ I now have almost totally lost the ability to read and absorb a longish article on the web or in print.” and another says with sadness ” I can no longer read War and Peace.” Mr. Carr goes on to say that “when we read on line, words are not the only information coming at us. There are eye catching advertisements alongside the text and hyperlinks in the text in case we wish to jump to different web pages. These distractions don’t just slow our reading, they also make it less likely that we will understand and retain new knowledge.”

I have had a similar experience with a different wonder of computer technology, the GPS. My wife has one and on a couple of occasions I have borrowed it to see how it worked on trips to the Boston area. It worked very well but you know, I never learned how to get there. I always had to depend on the GPS. I decided that I would try the old fashioned way and look at a map and write down the directions and, having written down the directions, I managed to get to my destination without ever having to refer to the written directions.

Perhaps I’m just old fashioned but I find as Alice and the Red Queen did, that no matter how fast I can, and more and more must, go in this connected world, the more things seem to stay the same, only they stay the same faster than they did before.

REFLECTION – “Just a Passing Fad” by Lenora Trussel

Michael Crosby gives me a ride in to worship committee meetings since we both live in Gorham. It is not really because of gas prices but it mostly is because we make each other laugh so hard that the commute has become something we look forward to.

I discovered that Michael stays on the fringes of the technology of communication; e-mail is about the extent he will become involved. He loves to tell stories and share news. Often he discovers that his wife, who is a frequenter of Facebook, has scooped his being able to tell the story to anyone who has not already read it. Michael is passionate about his feelings about communication technology. If you want to see his face turn red and the veins in his neck pop out, just get him to talk about cell phones.

Michael discovered that I too am on the fringes and probably do about as much as he does with technology. Though I did have a cell phone that was provided through work. Now that I am unemployed, I like not being tethered. I, on the other hand, have found that I am pretty apathetic about communication technology. My main reason for learning any of it is to stimulate synapses in my brain in order to get blood pumping into areas that would otherwise be prey to the dreaded “old timers disease”.

You see I believe this whole technology thing is a passing fad. I believe there is nothing our brains can't do. I think this is something that is quite honestly outdated itself on its own. I believe that we, as a species, were on the brink of teleportation by way of out-of-body travel, and the internal combustion engine was discovered so we chose to develop ways to get from one place to the next by machinery like cars, trains, airplanes, and yes even motorcycles. I also believe that we as a species decided that we would rather communicate with each other by use of machinery like the telegraph, then the telephone, and now e-mail and cell phones rather than put efforts into developing our minds to be telepathic.

I believe our mushy, pudding-like brains are the most powerful search engines ever known in the universe. The interesting thing is that scientists tell us that we are only using about 5% of that search engine. There does not seem to be much interest in learning how to tap into the other 95%. Education comes from the Latin root word, *educare*, which means to draw out. Our education systems used to make us learn things in order to give it back on a test. Now it seems our education system expects students to have to know simply where to find the answers without holding the information in their heads.

I recently presented a piece I wrote for one of my "Hospice the Musical Workshops". It was called "Exploring Oz". I talked about the main characters in the Wizard of Oz wanting something they did not have. Through the journey down the yellow brick road they all went through quite the adventure in order to discover that each of them had what they wanted inside of them all the time. The scarecrow was always the brains of the outfit, acting like a jester; the tin man was a heartfelt, compassionate, empathetic fellow; the lion was courageous when given the opportunity, and Dorothy had only to want to go home, click her heels and voila! Home she was.

This yellow brick road is taking us on quite an adventure. We have what we really need right inside ourselves if we simply believed. I believe we'll figure it out eventually. In the meantime Michael and I will laugh our way to our meetings and that will be a part of our adventure through this world of passing fads.

REFLECTION – "The Information Superhighway" by Erica Bartlett

When I was in college, during one of my visits to friends at Bates, I remember talking about the wonders of these strange new things called the Internet and e-mail. None of us were quite sure what we thought about it, and one of them commented somewhat wryly that they had been dragged "kicking and screaming onto the information superhighway."

I could sympathize. Although I grew up in a household of early adopters – we had one of the first models of portable CD players, for instance, and we got a Commodore 64 in the early 1980's – I personally have always been a bit slow on the uptake for new technology. Once I'm there, though, even if I may complain about some aspects, I've also found unexpected benefits.

E-mail is a good example. When I started college at Northeastern University in 1994, I got an e-mail account automatically. I didn't know much about it, though, until some of my Computer Science professors started sending us information via e-mail, and requested that we submit homework assignments the same way. With no choice, I started using it. It was okay, but it wasn't until my study abroad in England the fall of 1997 that I truly appreciated it.

E-mail provided a way for me to communicate with everyone back home, free of charge (always important for college students), with almost instantaneous delivery, but without worrying about finding times when we were all awake and available (always a challenge with the 6-hour time difference). When I came back, it also made it much easier for me to stay in touch with a couple of the friends I made overseas.

What I never expected, though, was that it would prove a boon in my relationship with my father. We were never much for talking on the phone – that was always my mom's responsibility – and whenever I got letters from my parents, my dad might tack a few lines on the end, but again, they were mostly by my mom.

So when she passed away, I'm not quite sure what would have happened if my dad and I had only those means of communication available. We might not have been in touch much at all. What worked for us was e-mail. We're both word-oriented people, sometimes more comfortable putting things on paper than giving them voice, and we're good typists. We started e-mailing on a regular basis, sometimes even daily, an exchange that continues to this day.

Family was also what prompted me to join Facebook. I had been avoiding it, a little hesitant about social media after hearing some unpleasant things about mySpace. But when my niece, who had been living with my brother in Auburn, moved to Sommerville, MA, to be homeschooled by her mom, I was suddenly more disconnected from her than I had ever been.

Then I found out she had gotten a FB account. It made me decide to take the plunge so that I could "friend" her and read about whatever she was doing and thinking. The result is that I feel more connected to her now than I did when she was in Maine, especially when I get to read some of her longer, blog-like posts or poetry. FB has also proven helpful in keeping in touch with friends who have families, since I can see pictures of their growing children and follow updates on their lives, so that even if we can only visit a few times a year, I still feel close to them.

And I need to at least mention the Internet, a way of communicating ideas to a mass audience in a way unprecedented in human history. I was fascinated to read an article (online, of course) in *The New York Times* about how many young people are going back to small-scale farming these days. The problem is that they often have trouble finding people to learn from. As the article states: "There is a knowledge gap that has been referred to as "the lost generation" — people their parents' age may farm but do not

know how to grow food. Their grandparents' generation is no longer around to teach them.”

So what did they do? They've started scouring the Internet for information posted by people scattered throughout the country, and perhaps even the world. Some have looked for videos on YouTube for farming tips. Craigslist has also proven beneficial in finding small-scale farming equipment that, until recently, wasn't valued and often considered antique.

These are just some examples of the positive changes to communication as a result of our technological age. I know it can be easier (and sometimes more fun) to focus on the negative aspects, and I've done my share of complaining. Yet thinking about the good helps remind me not to automatically demonize any new thing that comes along, and be more open to the future changes that will surely come.

DIALOGUE – “the Dream” by Rick Kimball

A playlet for two players, Self and God. Self comes to the microphone first, maybe to the side mike, puts on a nametag, and begins. God appears after Self's first lines, perhaps at the pulpit mike, and also puts on a nametag. Self never looks at God.

Self: God appeared to me in a dream the other night. Stricken with awe, I spoke up in wonder. “What are you doing here?”

(God appears, puts on nametag.)

God: I need you to deliver a message to humankind.

Self: Me? Why don't you deliver it yourself?

God: I tried. I got my chisel and hammer out, but the rocks are all covered with graffiti.

Self: So use Twitter. Send a Tweet.

God: Oh my God no.

Self: You're not supposed to say that. I am. And what's the matter with tweets?

God: I'm kind of old-fashioned .When it comes to technology, I'm all thumbs.

Self. Then text with a cell phone. Thumbs are just what you need for texting.

God: Aren't cell phones what kids use for sexting?

Self. Right.

God: Sexting is a sin.

Self: So you should have invented it yourself and used it for the creation. If Adam and Eve had been able to sext, you wouldn't have needed to invent snakes, and you could have eaten the apple yourself.

God: I wasn't hungry.

Self: Okay, but watch out for scurvy. You need to get your vitamin C from somewhere. Adam and Eve might have had their problems, but they never got scurvy.

God: Could I really use a Twitter tweet?

Self: Actually, now that I think of it, not for your purposes, no. Tweets are limited to 140 characters, and that's not enough room to explain yourself.

God: I never explain myself.

Self: So I've noticed.

God: But you can do some explaining. Tell me more about the technology options.

Self: You could try an I-Pad – you know, the one with 80,000 apps. Or use Facebook or YouTube or MySpace. Or set up your own database. Or – I know – a blog. “God's blog” has a nice ring to it, right? Speaking of rings, create your own special ringtone so you can call every phone in the world at once and get your message out. Or, let's see . . . there's BlueTooth, and Wi-Max, and Wy-Fi, and DSP and RFID

God (*interrupting*): Stop! I'll give humankind one thing, anyway.

Self: What's that?

God: You've improved on the Tower of Babel. I haven't understood a word you've said.

Self: Sorry about that, but listen, God, no offense, I was sort of hoping for a different kind of dream tonight, if you know what I mean, and I'm afraid I don't have time to give technology lessons.

God: I don't want a technology lesson. I just want to get my message out. But I can't use phones to do it.

Self: Why not?

God: Try it yourself. Call a number at random and say, “This is God speaking.” Half of them slam the phone down right then. The other half blaspheme first, then slam the phone down.

Self: Maybe I can help, but I need to know the message before I commit.

God: I want to say: People! Get your heads out of your cell phones and computer screens long enough to really communicate. Look each other in the eye and speak from heart to heart. That's the only sure way to peace and love and joy.

Self: I like it. Sounds like gospel truth to me. But how do I tell the world without using computer screens and cell phones? Or licking seven billion stamps?

God: I thought you might go to a mountaintop and yell.

Self: There's a thought. But the last time I climbed Katahdin, Paul LePage was up on the peak praising big business and condemning art. Nobody else could get a word in.

God: I was thinking more like Everest.

Self: I wasn't. Listen, what if I just start by spreading the word at A2U2?

God: A what, you what?

Self: A2U2. The Allen Avenue Unitarian Universalist Church in Portland, Maine.

God: Of course. Memory slips at my age, but I remember now why I chose your dream to visit. It's because Allen Ave is a place where people at least try to look each other in the eye and speak from heart to heart.

Self: You're right about that. Now, God, it's about those dreams I'm still hoping to have . . .

God: I hear you. And I'm on my way. I think I'll take one last look for a rock to chisel.

Self: Good idea. Just don't use the rocks around A2U2.

God: I know. UUs would be embarrassed to find a message chiseled by God on their own property.

Self: Thank you for your understanding.

God: I don't know much about technology, but I do know a thing or two about UUs.

(God removes nametag and leaves.)

Self: And listen, God . . . but God was gone, leaving me to my sleep and dreams. I dreamt on, of a world where people got their heads out of computer screens and cell phones, where they looked each other in the eye and spoke from heart to heart, where they moved toward peace and love and joy, where everything was beautiful. I woke some hours later, and wondered why God had not looked me in the eye. Moments later, standing in the shower, I finally realized: Even God can't look you in the eye when your eyes are shut.

(Self removes nametag and leaves.)

The End

CLOSING WORDS – excerpt from “The Dream” by Rick Kimball

As you are willing and able, please stand and join hands for our closing words.

And God said . . . People! Embrace technology. Enjoy your toys and your tools. But know that technology is the tool; you are not. Each and every day, get your heads out of your cell phones and computer screens long enough to really communicate. Look each other in the eye and speak from heart to heart. That’s the only sure way to peace and love and joy. Blessed be.

CLOSING MUSIC www.youtube.com/watch?v=7SOfKprT--U