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Distraction Eternal: How the Internet Threatens Prayer in the Digital Age

“I hear, but understand

Contrarily, and walk into the woods. ”

-Wendell Berry, *A Timbered Choir*

Man is a toolmaker. From the dawn of history, he has created tools to subdue and conquer the world around him. Animals do not have this toolmaking capacity. A beaver, for instance, is stuck with his tail to build his dam. He knows no better way than what God has given him, but God has given man the ability to create tools to surmount the difficulties that surround him. Today, many see the internet as the largest and most effective tool that has ever been invented. Much arguing occurs over whether or not internet usage is helpful, but Christians should ask a different question: is this internet usage good for our souls? For we know that the spiritual and physical are not divorced, but are closely entwined. Prayer, which consists primarily of attention, is endangered by the internet; psychological and neurological evidence shows that the internet distracts man and makes him constantly inattentive.

Before we understand how the internet affects prayer, we must first ask: What is prayer? Such a question may seem an odd one in an age where heavy loads of devotional books, prayer books, and prayer “requests” abound, for it would seem that prayer is already understood, as evidenced by the large amounts of documentation upon it. But such documentation does not

imply correct knowledge about a given activity, especially an activity as central to the being of man as prayer.

Simone Weil, a Christian writer, thinker, philosopher, and, briefly, soldier, identifies the core of prayer, without which the entire effort would not take place. In her work *Waiting for God*, Weil speaks about this central tenet: “Prayer consists of attention. It is the orientation of all the attention of which the soul is capable towards God. The quality of the attention counts for much in the quality of prayer” (Weil 57). Weil’s statement is one which, once realized, seems odd that it was not stated previously. For all relations to others are largely defined by attention. The young man who is captivated by his lover pays intense attention to every word she speaks, hungry for the next syllable. Without this intense attention on the part of the young one, the conversation would die quickly, unless his lover was oblivious to her lack of an audience.

Examples also abound in literature regarding the necessity of such attention. In Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, King Claudius, having committed many sins against his royal court, attempts to confess in prayer his transgressions, but finds that, distracted by himself and his circumstances, “My words fly up, my thoughts remain below. / Words without thoughts never to heaven go” (95). Brother Lawrence, a Carmelite monk living in the sixteenth century, expressed a similar difficulty in his *Practice of the Presence of God*. Lawrence recalls when he first entered the monastery, the time allocated for prayer was often consumed with his thoughts of necessary business, financial deficits, and the like (27). St. Teresa of Avila, another Carmelite writing in the sixteenth century, warns how prayer, even if eloquent, is worthless if it does not attend to the presence of the One to whom it is directed: “If a person does not think whom he is addressing, I do not consider him to be praying at all” (*The Interior Castle* 98).

But attention plays an even more vital role than sustaining prayer. Classical texts as well

as Scripture teach that man also becomes what he beholds, or pays attention to. In the first four books of Homer's *Odyssey*, Telemachus, Odysseus's son, embarks on a journey to various islands surrounding Ithaca in an attempt to locate his father, who has been fighting at Troy for over ten years and is rumored to be dead. Telechachus' journey, as one commentator, Denton Snider, notes, is his education in the ways of virtue (*Homer's Odyssey: a Commentary* 74). But for Telemachus to learn what is fitting and right he must first behold the good, or, in other words, pay attention to the good. When Telemachus visits Menelaus and his recently-returned wife, Helen, he sees Helen's beauty, and the sight, in turn, creates beauty in him:

Telemachus is to see and hear Helen: that is, indeed, one of his supreme experiences.

But it is not here a matter of superficial staring at a beautiful woman: all that Helen is, the total cycle of her spirit's history, is to enter his heart and become a vital portion of his discipline. It is probable that the youth does not realize every thing that Helen means and is; still he beholds her, and that in itself is an education. (Snider 83)

It is not enough for Telemachus to simply hear of the history and beauty of Helen, for if he wishes to himself possess that same beauty, he must see her in person; Telemachus must behold what he wishes to become, and what he beholds will in turn form him. Christ also teaches that man is what he beholds. In Luke 11:30, Jesus teaches "The light of the body is the eye: therefore when thine eye is single, thy whole body also is full of light; but when thine eye is evil, thy body also is thus" (KJV). What man chooses to look at, Christ teaches, will inform the content of his soul.

Christ also makes the necessity of attention evident in the Lord's prayer. In Matthew 6:9, Jesus tells his disciples to: "After this manner therefore pray ye: Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name..." (KJV). The Lord's Prayer is much more than a list of requests to God: it

is also a cry for attentiveness, a plea that man might be attentive to God and to His Kingdom. For God does not need His children to ask that His name be hallowed, His kingdom come, and His will be done, for God is almighty and hallowed independent of His people's requests. But when man cries out to God with the Lord's prayer, he is asking that he might be similar to Telemachus in that he would behold the True and Beautiful in God's kingdom. For as we have learned, man is what he beholds, and if he beholds the hallowed will and presence of God, he also becomes like God. The Lord's prayer shapes his ability to "see" the Grace of God: the more he sees, the more he becomes. For God's Kingdom to come, it must first come in man, and for God's Kingdom to come in man, he must first be attentive to God's kingdom, he must perceive the Will of God being done.

It follows that when man prays, he is shaped as he focuses on God. Attention in prayer is more than a simple act of "contracting one's muscles," as Weil would say (58). Neither is it a discourse, or some sort of "heavenly telephone" that connects to God in heaven. Rather, it is, as Jacques Ellul says in *Prayer and Modern Man*, a "form of life" in the presence of God (60). It is in prayer that man agrees to listen to God and be grateful for what he hears. Bishop Kallistos Ware of the Eastern Orthodox Church recognizes this quiet listening: "Prayer is a state of continual gratitude" (44). Elsewhere, Ware elaborates: "Reaching out toward the eternal truth ... the seeker begins to wait upon God in quietness and silence ... [in other words], simply listening" (121). Scripture also affirms that man, when he listens to God attentively, will receive what he needs (Matthew 6:11 KJV).

But the careful reader notes that this is not just a discourse on prayer, but also the internet. This same reader will ask, "How could the internet, a mere tool, affect such a spiritual activity as prayer?" To answer this question, we must first examine the nature of mediums, then move to how

the internet functions as a medium. It is necessary to note that man is surrounded by mediums.

These mediums are not mere vessels, but act as the molders and shapers of how humans experience reality. Marshall McLuhan, a Canadian scholar, was a key figure in understanding the effects of media on man. McLuhan, in his work *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, explains that every medium introduces a change of scale, pace, or pattern into human life (152). Neil Postman, a student and scholar of McLuhan, states this in simpler terms: “Whether we are experiencing the world through the lens of speech or the printed word or the television camera, our media-metaphors classify the world for us, sequence it, frame it, enlarge it, reduce it, color it, argue a case for what the world is like” (*Amusing Ourselves to Death* 10). But this last phrase should give pause: “argue a case for what the world is like” (10). Can mediums actually contain a message about the nature of things?

According to McLuhan, they do, and even extend the human past his former limits. By employing mediums, man’s sensory abilities are enlarged to a greater scale, but similar to the view offered by a pair of binoculars, this extension also diminishes other faculties. In other words, the ratio of his senses is changed. To prove this, McLuhan coined the aphorism “The Medium is the Message,” which stands as the central tenet for the rest of his writing, and in the introduction to his book *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, McLuhan states his case for the aphorism well:

In a culture like ours, long accustomed to splitting and dividing all things as a means of control, it is sometimes a bit of a shock to be reminded that, in operational and practical fact, the medium is the message. This is merely to say that the personal and social consequences of any medium — that is, of any extension of ourselves — result

from the new scale that is introduced into our affairs by each extension of ourselves.

(151)

For the modern technology user, who often believes himself to be in total control of his tools, it is strange to be informed that every medium contains not only an unchangeable effect but also a persistent message — a statement, consisting of a newly-introduced scale, that changes the way the world is seen. The content of the medium, McLuhan says, exacts an infinitesimally small effect on the user as compared to the medium itself (*Essential McLuhan* 152). And the medium, while embodying its message, extends, and limits, the user in some capacity. In his book *The Medium is the Massage*, McLuhan illustrates how various mediums are the extension of some human faculty, either “psychic” or “physical.” The book, for instance, acts as an extension of the eye and the wheel acts as an extension of the foot. These extensions are experienced in unison with the message, remain inherent in the medium, and cannot be avoided (26).

Perhaps the greatest medium, and therefore extension, of modern man is the internet. The internet, as a medium, fragments its users in a myriad of ways. The key to this fragmentation is a deprivation of attention. The internet demands of its users a mechanistic, technical mindset that encourages distraction and precludes sustained attention, resulting in a lack of real, authentic interaction with the world and with others. This is no mere ludditic conjecture: clinically certified psychological and neurological studies have revealed the same.

One notable psychological study was conducted by Sherry Turkle. Turkle, a psychoanalyst and Professor of Social Sciences at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, began conducting interviews in the late 1990s about how the emerging network called the World Wide Web was affecting its users. Her findings over the next fifteen years indicated that the Net

placed an expectation of efficiency and quantity upon all its users. Turkle notices that this expectation produced inattentive, frenetic users, who, in most cases, were dissatisfied with their choice to surrender their human relations to the internet, but would not choose the alternative of disconnecting.

In one interview, Turkle speaks with Diane, thirty-six, who is the curator of a major museum in the midwest. Diane cannot keep up with the pace of digital life. She feels, in her words, like a “maximizing machine,” having recently been required by her employer to acquire a smartphone and a blog: she attends to both frequently, in addition to a Twitter feed and a Facebook page. Diane speaks of how she is up late each night with her smartphone, but this does not prevent her from becoming buried by all the correspondences sent to her various accounts. Diane confides in Turkle that she wishes to take a vacation, but is dreading it secretly, for the expectation among her friends and coworkers is that one stays connected on vacation, for “the successful are always connected” (Turkle 165). Diane has recently lost her voice; her doctor says it is due to stress, even though she has been primarily typing to communicate as of late. Turkle notes the issue with irony and clarity: “In a world of constant communication, Diane’s symptom seems fitting: she has become a machine for communicating, but she has no voice left for herself” (165). Diane is experiencing the first demand of the internet: distraction. Diane is so distracted by her various modes of communication that it is safe to say she fits T.S. Eliot’s statement in his poem *Four Quartets*: “Distracted from distraction by distraction” (502). Turkle adds, “The self shaped in a world of rapid response measures success by calls made, e-mails answered, texts replied to, contacts reached. This self is calibrated on the basis of what technology proposes, by what it makes easy” (166). Diane’s job is now defined *in toto* by the abilities proffered to her by the Net. Diane no longer curates, she communicates. The result: her communications are so

multiferous and frequent that her attention span no longer has room for her original task (166).

Turkle then interviews a group of seniors at the Cranston High School for Boys in upstate New York. Roman, eighteen, talks of how he texts and drives: “I know I should [stop], but it’s not going to happen. If I get a Facebook message or something posted on my wall ... I have to see it. I have to.” (171). The other boys assent to similar feelings. Turkle turns to the group, asking, “When was the last time you felt that you didn’t want to be interrupted?” Her question is answered with silence. One bold student says, “I’m waiting to be interrupted right now” (172). Turkle finds it odd that these boys crave distraction so greatly that they are unable to focus on such an important task as driving. Turkle, shocked, writes that, “They are, after all, risking their lives to check their messages” (172). This is not odd for the adolescents, however; acts of sustained attention, of focusing on one task for a period of time, are simply becoming rare for their age group. Driving and abstaining from texting seems strange because it would be focusing on one issue, namely, driving the car, when there are so many others waiting just beyond the lock screen of a smartphone. These boys no longer need, or want, to pay attention to what is at hand, given the availability of a text message or Facebook post. And there is never a lack of such messages, for as the Net expands, so does its services; most users now have Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram, which automatically notify their phone when a new message arrives (173). There is no end to the distraction.

Turkle briefly interrupts her interviews to describe a new site mentioned by many of her clients. The site, known as Chatroulette, allows users to see a live audio and video feed of a random person, selected from a pool of users around the world. If the person is boring, or, as is often the case, naked, the user can skip to a new target. This skipping to a new person has been termed “nexting,” Turkle notes, due to the button that is pressed to change partners. Most

Chatroulette users “next” every few seconds; in a given session, one may see hundreds of different people for three to four seconds each, if that. Chatroulette accurately represents what the internet espouses for relationships: efficiency and quantity. The result is an anonymous stimulus of hundreds of faces, each saying something different, quickly terminated by the click of the “next” button. The idea of a human relationship breaks down in an environment like Chatroulette, as Turkle notes that, in this high-paced chatting environment, “faces and bodies become objects” (225). Chatroulette is relationships for the dwarfed attention span, and by looking closely at what it offers, we see what the internet ultimately offers for relationships.

The internet not only fragments relationships — it also fragments our brains, rewiring them for distraction and inattention. According to Nicholas Carr, author of *The Shallows: What the Internet is Doing to Our Brains*, the effects of the internet on our brains are vast. Carr begins his study by correcting a common error about the brain. Many believe that the brain is a fixed organ, an unchanging central processing unit. Carr notes that this is not simply a vulgar error, either: most biologists and neurologists held this position for hundreds of years. But modern research has revealed that the brain is actually plastic, changing according to need: “The brain is not the machine we once thought it to be. Though different regions are associated with different mental functions, the cellular components do not form permanent structures or play rigid roles. They’re flexible. They change with experience, circumstance, and need” (Carr 29). To illustrate this point, Carr cites a study from the late 1990s about London cab drivers’ brains. The cab drivers were found to possess, in comparison with an average citizen, an enlarged posterior hippocampus. The posterior region of the hippocampus, researchers believe, is where spatial information is stored; in order to navigate the complicated streets of London, the cab drivers’ brains had adapted accordingly. The researchers also found that in these brains the anterior

hippocampus had shrunk. Those conducting the study surmised that, in order to enlarge the posterior hippocampus, these brains shrunk the anterior hippocampus, potentially decreasing the drivers' ability for other types of memorization (Carr 32). Alvaro Pascal-Leone, a neurology researcher at Harvard Medical School, summarizes the experiment: "Plasticity [is] the normal ongoing state of the nervous system throughout the life span" (qtd. in Carr 31).

An important corollary to neuroplasticity that Carr emphasizes is found in the research of John Sweller, an Australian educational psychologist. Sweller has worked for over thirty years to understand how people process and learn information. Sweller says that human brains have two types of memory: short-term and long-term. Sweller's research reveals short-term memory can only hold about two to three things at once. With focus, information is slowly transferred from short-term to long-term memory. Carr provides an illuminating metaphor for this process: "Imagine filling a bathtub with a thimble; that's the challenge in transferring information from working memory onto long-term memory" (124). Sweller also writes that, contrary to popular belief, long-term memory is not a mere "filing system;" rather, "long-term memory is actually the seat of understanding. It stores not just facts but complex concepts, or 'schemas.' By organizing scattered bits of information into patterns of knowledge, schemas give depth and richness to our thinking" (Carr 124). And as the working memory becomes overloaded, Sweller says, the brain struggles to understand and process concepts and ideas (Carr 125).

Carr cites two studies to emphasize the effects of short-term memory overload, or, as Sweller terms it, "cognitive overload," especially as relates to internet usage (125). In the first study, two groups were asked to read an article. The first group was presented the article in plaintext form; the other group was presented the article in hypertext form, with certain words highlighted in blue and linked to other webpages. The plaintext group was able to remember, in

every case, more information from the article than the hypertext group. Due to their overtaxed short-term memory, the hypertext group “could not remember what they had and had not read” (Carr 127). The hypertext group was constantly distracted by the possibilities that waited behind a hyperlink — every link offered an implicit choice of a new page. In the second study, a group of adults was presented with a series of colored shapes while wearing headphones that occasionally emitted short beeps. In the first trial, the candidates were asked to focus just on the shapes. In the second trial, they were asked to count the number of beeps. The results showed that while listening to the beeps, the adults’ brains had failed to remember either the visual cues or the number of beeps; their brains had, in Carr’s words, “short-circuited” due to the cognitive overload (133). Carr notes that the internet offers a similar type of multitasking, except on steroids; the Web’s users, however, willingly give up their crucial cognitive abilities: “We ask the Internet to keep interrupting us, in ever more and different ways. We willingly accept the loss of concentration and focus, the division of our attention and the fragmentation of our thoughts, in return for the wealth of compelling or at least diverting information we receive. Tuning out is not an option many of us would consider” (134). The internet is a distracted domain of information, constantly vying for what small pieces of the user’s attention it can snatch. And by prohibiting users from forming connections between disparate pieces of information, the internet also prohibits the formation of knowledge, for cognitive overload severs the pathway to lasting knowledge (134).

The veritable king of this distracted domain is Google, the internet’s largest company. In his chapter “The Church of Google,” Carr reveals how Google encourages the distractionary nature of the Net. Google, as the world’s largest search engine, helps to shape users’ experience of the internet, and one way Google does this is through Adwords. Adwords is Google’s advertising

platform based upon the pay-per-click, or PPC, model. When advertisers wish to place an ad on a Google search result, they agree to pay Google anywhere from a few cents to a few dollars for each click received on the ad. In this way, Google wishes their users to be distracted, for a focused, attentive user is likely not to make many clicks (Carr 157). Irene Au, former head of design at Google, outlines Google's parallel design strategy: "Our goal is to get users in and out really quickly. All our design decisions are based on that strategy" (qtd. in Carr 156). Google's page-ranking algorithm, Cafeinne, is also based upon distractionary principles. Cafeinne ranks search results primarily according to the "freshness" of pages. "Freshness" is determined by two major factors: the age of the page and the number of clicks the page receives from outside sources (159). Thus, Google wishes for its users to click and surf more often, not staying on any page for long, in order that they may collect more data about more pages and serve up more accurate search results. Google's research has revealed that users rarely read a page in its entirety — instead, they read in a form similar to an "F," starting at the top of each page and skimming the rest. Google's design decisions reflect this cursory reading structure, and they are constantly testing for more "effective" design decisions (136). If every Google user stayed on a site for hours at a time, not bouncing out to other pages, Google would be out of business, for they would not have any data to feed their algorithm. Google is designed to divide a user's attention into as many pieces as possible, feed these pieces into their algorithm, then sell the remaining bits to advertisers for revenue.

Both Turkle and Carr show how the internet seeks to distract and fragment its users. Turkle's research shows that this fragmentation effects how humans see themselves in relation to others; interactions are now valued according to their quantity, availability, and speed. The result is a group of users like those at Cranston high school: constantly distracted, and craving further

distraction. Carr's research, on the other hand, shows how the internet effects man's neurological wiring, interrupting the formation of long-term memories and preventing the synthesis of lasting knowledge. Carr also shows how the internet's largest company, Google, thrives on distraction, and finds every occasion to divert its users from acts of singular attention through its advertising structure and search algorithms. The evidence is, unfortunately, damning. The internet, as a whole, seeks to distract its users and make them inattentive.

Prayer, as a primarily attentive act, is therefore harmed by the internet. For as we have seen, the internet is designed to distract. There are no distracted prayers. It is only in singular attentiveness that we pray to Our Lord. The pace of internet-connected, digital life is wholly incompatible with prayer. So how, then, are Christians to interact with the internet? Are we to be like the Luddites of the 19th century, loathing the internet, plotting its destruction?

The answer is: no. The great mistake of the Luddites was that they acted out of fear. Seeing how the Industrial Revolution threatened their livelihoods and futures, they destroyed the machines, hoping to return to an earlier age of artisanship and quality. Their mission ultimately failed. The Industrial Revolution spread like wildfire, engulfing most of the globe. The moral of this story is that there is no returning to an earlier age. We cannot simply throw off the mantle of connectedness and inattention and return to simpler, more attentive times. Nor can we renounce the internet entirely, for internet usage is nearly a requirement for living in this modern age.

Instead, we must detach. Detachment is not abandonment, but instead an attitude of wariness and distance from distractionary structures. This means using the internet in moderation, being aware of its effects. This also means preferring more focused means of internet communication over others. A thoughtful email, though not as thoughtful as a handwritten letter, is still more focused and intentional than a Facebook message or Twitter update. This focus

translates into more meaningful interactions with others. This focus also prepares us for prayer. For that is the goal of all this reform: to safeguard and nourish prayer. Prayer is too important a gift to surrender to the needs of efficiency. Paul did not command the Thessalonians to “Pray without ceasing” for nothing (1 Thessalonians 5:17). It is through prayer that we commune with our maker and are reminded of our purpose here on earth.

Peter Kreeft, in his essay “Confessions of a Computer Hater,” says, “I do not recommend that we become Luddites, but saints ... We need not teetotalers but designated drivers at the digital orgy” (15). Orgy is truly the proper term, for connected technologies are progressing at such a rate that they will soon be all-encompassing. Christians must find their precepts for technology usage from above, not from below. If we return to a life of prayer and detachment from distraction, we have attended to the needs of our soul. A.N. Whitehead once noted, “It is the business of the future to be dangerous” (qtd. in McLuhan 160). Christ, during his earthly ministry, knew what great danger the future held for him. But he kept His sight on heaven and on His Father throughout it all. As we progress through this technological age, let us “go and do likewise” (Luke 10:37).