Technology: Master Or Servant Of A Spiritual Life?

Contributions By Albert Borgmann And Wendell Berry

BY

Charles Falzon

A thesis submitted to Regis College at the Faculty of Theology of the Toronto School of Theology in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Theology awarded by Regis College and the University of Toronto

© Copyright by Charles Falzon 2012
Abstract

In this paper we will look at the effects of modern technology though the lenses of moral philosophy and spiritual reflection. Our principal questions will be: Is technology servant or master of the spiritual life? How is technology a challenge for the spiritual life and why? How varied can our relationship with technology be depending on our worldview and our particular engagement with it? Does technology promote a denial of grace within us, or can it be channelled as a support of grace? How can the application of technological progress be used for the good and how do we insure that we work towards balancing any negative implications by developing awareness and by remaining centred in our own sense of self?

To explore this topic we will focus on two principal writers: Albert Borgmann takes a philosophical, experiential and pragmatic approach and looks at technology on a broad and somewhat sympathetic manner. Wendell Berry, shaped by a somewhat different cultural context, is more critical and responds with a mix of local specificity and an imaginative literary emotional engagement.
We will look at how we might reacquaint ourselves with what is at the heart of technology and how that connects with the core of our spiritual selves. We will examine our modern obsession with technology and efficiency in the context of liberal capitalism, and explore how we may reconcile that with an innate desire to love. It is hoped that we can provide some insight into how one might approach the technological particulars of our every day lives, with love and with awareness that such technology is part of a larger whole. Our objective is to in fact develop a technological ethical balance that can embrace the reality of our industrialized lives with a freedom to navigate towards good, and to continue being active partners in the process of salvation and creation.
Acknowledgments

I would like to sincerely thank my thesis supervisor, Professor Mary Jo Leddy from Regis College who introduced me to Wendell Berry and Albert Borgmann and for providing balance, wisdom and encouragement during the researching and writing of this work. I would also like to acknowledge the other members of my thesis committee: Professor Jack Costello SJ from Regis College and Professor Lawrence E. Schmidt from the Department for the Study of Religion at the University of Toronto. Their assessment and suggestions have greatly helped strengthen my perspective and will also provide a framework for my future work on the subject. Finally I would like to thank my family. They have accompanied me with patience and love throughout this journey.
# Table of Contents

1. Introduction p 1

2. What is Spirituality? p 4
   2.1 Spirituality is contextual p 7
   2.2 Spirituality is relational p 7
   2.3 Spirituality is prayerful p 8
   2.4 Spirituality is action p 8

3. What is Technology? p 10
   3.1 Technology as automation, means to an end p 11
   3.2 Technology as a promise p 13
   3.3 Technology and liberal democracy p 15
   3.4 Technology and the device paradigm p 18
   3.5 Technology and work p 21
   3.6 Technology and progress p 23
   3.7 Technology – philosophy versus science p 26
   3.8 Technology and creation p 28

4. The Shadow of Technology p 30
   4.1 Technology and sin p 30
   4.2 Technology and a distorted world view p 31
   4.3 Technology and our values p 34
   4.4 Disengagement and alienation p 37
   4.5 Public and private divide p 42
   4.6 Technology and reverse adaptation p 44
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>The effects of technology on Spirituality</td>
<td>p 47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.1</td>
<td>Spirituality of technology: The Challenge of context</td>
<td>p 47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.2</td>
<td>Spirituality of technology: Relationships with our world</td>
<td>p 49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.3</td>
<td>Spirituality of technology: Relationships with our own self</td>
<td>p 54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.4</td>
<td>Technology and relationships: Hyper reality</td>
<td>p 54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>Spirituality of technology: The ability to pray</td>
<td>p 59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.6</td>
<td>Spirituality of technology: Acts of love</td>
<td>p 59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.7</td>
<td>Spirituality of technology: Work</td>
<td>p 60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>Reflections on Borgmann and Berry</td>
<td>p 66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.1</td>
<td>A new theology of technology</td>
<td>p 67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.2</td>
<td>A call to engage</td>
<td>p 70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.3</td>
<td>Tactics</td>
<td>p 77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.4</td>
<td>Focal Realities</td>
<td>p 77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.5</td>
<td>God in all things</td>
<td>p 79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>Some Additional perspectives</td>
<td>p 81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.1</td>
<td>New technology and spirituality: Reading the sign of the times</td>
<td>p 81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.2</td>
<td>A race against time</td>
<td>p 83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>p 86</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Chapter 1

Introduction

Since the advent of modern society, technological progress has determined and defined many of our attitudes relating to happiness, power and our sense of value. It has also presented us with a series of challenges that intuitively seem to provide a tension with what it means to be a full human being. Technology has shifted from being a tool aimed at assisting us in our creative earthly roles and indeed has become a mediator of self-awareness and an end unto itself. It is a challenge for anyone who is invested in today’s culture not to be absorbed by the momentum of the technological tsunami, one that multiplies in force no sooner than it has made its last mark in our midst. It is a challenge to delve into the core tensions caused by this wave and to be open to understanding the potential extent of alienation and distortion of our humanity that can be residual factors of this force of human industry. It may be difficult to tell the difference between our human mission as partners in creation and our obsession to just do and achieve more

In this paper we will look at the effects of modern technology though the lenses of moral philosophy and spiritual reflection. We will ask the following questions. Is technology servant or master of a fuller life? How and why is technology a challenge for a life lived on a spiritual foundation? How can the application of technological progress be used for the good? In addition, how do we insure that we work towards balancing any negative implications by developing awareness
and remaining centred in our sense of self? To explore this topic we will focus primarily on the work of Albert Borgmann who provides a broad and critical analysis of technology while remaining somewhat sympathetic to the role it plays in our lives. We will look in detail at Borgmann’s philosophical understanding and his development of an ethical technological paradigm. To do this we will draw heavily from his book, *Technology and the Character of Contemporary Culture*, which presents technology, which in itself is value neutral, as having been set loose in, and quickly becoming an integral partner of, liberal democracy and the free market society. We will also look at other works that more closely connect his philosophy with the ethic of living in a world shaped by American culture. These include *Crossing the Postmodern Divide* and *Real American Ethics: Taking Responsibility for our Country* as well as, *Christianity in the Culture of Technology, Power Failure*. We encounter his sense of how a Christian morality can provide a better way to interface with progress. We will focus on Borgmann’s ethical methodology and his development of a solid foundational philosophy of technology. This in fact becomes the basis of our own reflection. We will contrast this analytical approach with the reflective, spiritual and experiential wisdom of Wendell Berry. While Berry comes from the same era and nation as Borgmann, he is more critical and responds with a mix of local specificity and a literary emotional engagement. Drawing from Berry’s major works such as, *The Art of the Commonplace and Citizenship Papers*, we will look at a profound and visceral understanding of the alienating effects of technology. We will explore the ramifications of Berry’s choice to withdraw from a global
technology-dependent existence, as he focused his hope on the land and localized community. We will compare the works of the two writers and discuss limitations, while developing some constructive reflections.

In this paper we will look at how we might reacquaint ourselves with what is at the heart of technology and how that connects with the core of our spiritual selves. We will look at our modern obsession with technological progress and efficiency in the context of liberal capitalism. We will explore how we may reconcile that with an innate desire for goodness. It is hoped that these reflections can provide some insight into how one might approach the technological particulars of our everyday lives with love and awareness that such technology is part of a larger whole. Out of that awareness can come a responsible and proactive response. Our objective is to in fact develop a technological "golden mean" that can embrace the reality of our changing world and our industrialized lives with a freedom to navigate towards good and to continue being active partners in the process of salvation and creation. In Aristotelian fashion, this ‘golden mean’ is hoped to be the right judgement call, a justice point lying between extreme ends of the ethical technological spectrum which ranges from total withdrawal from modern human progress, to an irresponsible assumption of a ubiquitous technological reality.

The concluding objective of this paper is to present a balance, a practical reflection of hope that invites us to engage in a new, spiritual and meditative understanding of technology. Such a relationship is one of responsibility and hope for the future.
Chapter 2

What is Spirituality?

Why do we want to live a spiritual life and how does it matter? As we contextualize technology in its relationship with spirituality, it is first useful to consider our own understanding of what spirituality means. For many, spirituality is synonymous with a religious set of beliefs. It is true that religious traditions have held a paramount role in human history as the crucible of spiritual yearnings. This paper draws primarily from teachings and concepts of the Judeo-Christian teachings, particularly that of the Catholic tradition. Albert Borgmann, while engaged in a secular academic framework, is Roman Catholic and bases his philosophy of technology on Christian moral ethics. However, the question of defining our “spiritual selves” must go beyond a narrow Christian understanding.

“Moral convictions are certainly open to public discussion, disagreement, and attempts at gentle persuasion. But it is not right for Christians to denounce Muslims or Atheists. The question of what to hold sacred, to the contrary, arises in the realm of civility, whose standards of conduct, unlike laws, are neither compulsory nor, unlike personal convictions, optional.”

We live in a world where a sense of clarity can no longer be found in silos built around dogma and ritual. A multicultural mosaic of beliefs is mixed with scientific scepticism about metaphysical forces. This wide open sharing of ideas and values has been further stimulated by immigration and the communication tools

---

1 Albert Borgmann, Real American Ethics, Taking Responsibility for our Country, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2006, p194
of modern technology. At the same time, we generally live in communities of conflicts. We enjoy a diversity of beliefs that often conflict with each other, so we retreat into the solitude of our own minds and hearts to reflect and evaluate our action. We have in effect created a new silo, one that prides itself on being a secular society where we are rarely able to apply questions of spirituality relating to our social innovations and aspirations. Furthermore, many who are no longer rooted in a particular religious doctrine, are still keenly aware of deep spiritual yearnings and a sense of moral values. Technology permeates all aspects of society and must be balanced by a sense of spiritual wholeness that goes beyond any one belief system. A common understanding of spiritual wholeness can be accessed in numerous ways, including through Catholic Christianity, as religion continues to be a potent manifestation of our spiritual selves in community. However, the first step in reaching this wholeness and developing an enlightened approach to evaluating technology is to become aware that spirituality like technological advancement is a universal concept. While the engagement with both differs widely depending on the specific cultural context of time, place etc. the underlying essence of our spiritual yearning and our desire for salvation, transcends cultural backgrounds and choices of dogma. Likewise, so does our drive to create, build and enhance the creative process through human technology.

Can we and in fact should we, try to define the moral good and a sense of our spiritual selves? Well known agnostic writers such as Richard Dawkins tell us that reasonable people will disagree on any such definition. Instead, we choose a
state of moral and spiritual neutrality that heretofore offers little foundation and hence, the conflicts persist among us. Albert Borgmann points out that the social sciences have attempted to fill the void of our questioning, but are unable to fully help as they endeavour to structure our drives by assuming a scientific paradigm, even though such an approach continues to fail. According to Borgmann, this allegiance to science is making the social sciences an ineffective way to contain our sense of who we are and are unable to provide a clear, balanced perspective to the negative potential of human actions. Ultimately, the social sciences are as non-demonstrable as the metaphysical ones. Borgmann stated that, while social paradigms may help encourage us in expanding our view by finding commonality with others, they may also restrict our development and attentiveness to our true spiritual yearnings. Social paradigms may attempt to provide rigid structures and rules that prevent openness and the humility to accept the unknown. While calling themselves scientific, these approaches are more akin to the rigidity found in fundamentalist religion. Instead, we find ourselves in a neutral approach that is comfortable within a liberal democracy. This neutrality often precludes a public discourse on what is good and therefore providing no boundaries, or at least balance, to help contain the negative elements of our behaviour and so called progress. Secular society seems to have found no way to deal with a definition and approach to spiritual thought. At its core, spiritual experience is both personal and relational, and as such cannot easily be defined. It may be useful instead, to consider five important elements that shape our spiritual identities and

---

2 Albert Borgmann, Technology and the Character of Contemporary Life, A philosophical Inquiry, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1984 p75
journeys. Spirituality, while universal in its essence, is contextual in its manifestation. It is about our relationships with the world around us. It is a response to our desire to connect with our real selves, to be centred in our sense of being, to be prayerful and loving through our action.

2.1 Spirituality is Contextual

A full spiritual sense of being is nurtured through our engagement in a particular place and time. We are not islands, but live in nature, in communities, in traditions and in a particular point of history. We are affected by our experience and thus a fuller understanding and appreciation of such context will allow us to more clearly understand who we are and that we in turn, can effect, draw from and build on our overall experience. Our lived spirituality is greatly influenced by our theology. Indeed theology and spirituality are inextricably linked. Theology attempts to help us understand our innermost experiences in relation to God. As Christians this is centred on a redemptive God who is forgiving and loving. This God is experienced through both tension and grace. This ‘knowing’ that theology helps us become aware of is unfulfilled without the living faith of spirituality. Theological reflection and spiritual engagement are part of a whole that helps us experience ourselves and our world.

2.2 Spirituality is Relational

Our humanity is about being in relationship. We are not isolated characters living in a shell simply dwelling within the context. We are in relationship with the other, which includes not simply people of our immediate families, but a broader series
of relationships including all humans, animals, our natural environment and indeed the universe. Relationships necessitate both responsibility and fortitude. They help us accelerate our creative potential, but also lead to an ease in understanding our relationship with ourselves. This relationship with ourselves calls for a psychological and spiritual health that helps us be aware of our potential to create and to love. Finally, we are in relationship with a higher force and our sense of God. That relationship with the transcendent is about trust and hope.

2.3 Spirituality is Prayerful

Prayer in this context is not about specific recitations, but about humility and trust in something much bigger than us. Spirituality comes partly from a letting go of our false sense of control and allowing ourselves to be open to the grace of the universe that gives everything life and purpose.

2.4 Spirituality is Action

Spirituality is lived. It is about responding to our sense of who we are, our context, our relationships and enact that sense of purpose with humility through loving work and engagement. Our cultures, our history and our religious customs have significant influence on the shaping of our spiritualties. Our sense of being with God is only understood within a construct. Such reading is outside of our inner selves. It is affected by and read through a plethora of historical lenses. Political, geographical, economic and social narratives determine our understanding of values and our response to that context further supports the
adopted norm. The past controls the present and the present effects our reading of the past. If we limit our reading of the past and our determination of our present lived spirituality within the confines of a closed myth, we may lose site of the progressive nature of creation, of wisdom and of our journey back to God. In such an evolving universe we need to look at the past not as a closed book, but as an interpretation that can be further interpreted, one that can lead to the development of a new language and a new vantage point for today.

In order to do that, we need to think outside of our ideologies and become aware of the constraints within which our spirituality is understood. In order to be attentive to who we are, we must step out of old narratives and push beyond our closed myths. Spirituality is not about finding a perfect ideology, but about living within our limitations as humans and living with each other in an open manner. Openness to God will allow the mysteries of His or Her creation back into our realities and permit us to look at ideologies less as a prison and more as a way to communicate the reading of the time. This understanding of who we are is both personal and relational. It is both grounded in tradition and evolving in dialogue with culture. This balance of subjectivity within an objective framework requires attentiveness to how we read our narratives and a discernment that allows the mystery of God back into our open journeys.
Chapter 3

What is Technology?

In this chapter we will look at a description of technology not merely as the mechanical capacity that humans have had for thousands of years, but at a framework that goes beyond the tools of our labour. As well, we will explore a philosophical understanding of the technological human experience. Situated in history, we will look particularly at technology in its post enlightenment and post-industrial evolution, where it more aptly reflects how science has attempted to take hold of, as Borgmann calls it, the “cosmic architecture” and has taken on a rigorous agenda of manipulation and novelty.

“It is a mistake to think that a world view must shrink to nothing after it has given up its scientific elements. The Aristotelian hierarchy of being need not be given up with Aristotelian mechanics and dynamics.”

Over the last 150 years, social progress has been fuelled by the sense that technology was going to cure the world of its major ailments. Since this advent of modernity, industrial society ventured on a progressive production model, focussed on rapid growth and efficiency, without much thought to any collateral damage to the fabric of society, to nature or to one’s sense of self. But over the last forty or fifty years, a time that is often called post –modernity, the foundational premise of the industrial machine has raised many ethical questions which remain unanswered. The world is still burdened with wars, poverty, disease and illiteracy. At the same time the nature of ‘self’ has given way

---

3 Ibid 29
to individualism and the velocity of technological change is greater than ever before. Technological advancement is no longer focused only on manufacturing and social production, but on information and communication. With this shift has come an insatiable desire for control and individualism. The efficiency of the assembly line has given way to the communications freeway while fundamental, mitigating ethical questions are still not sufficiently being resolved.

3.1 Technology as Automation: Means to an End

Technology brought automation into human history. The steam engine was a revolutionary tool and Borgmann posits that this machinery attempted to liberate society from the “uncertainties” of individual judgement. While in many ways technology succeeded, it also began a journey of alienation. The power of steam became the centre of controversy immediately after it was introduced and the debate on whether or not this machinery was a necessary means to an end continues in varied ways today. Work shifted from being about humans who used machines as tools, to machines who used humans as tools.\(^4\) Automation according to Borgmann is a reflection of humanity’s attempt to perfect the division and reduction of labour. Technology is aimed almost exclusively at production and consumption with little regard to custom, craft and tradition. Borgmann says that the results ranged on a spectrum between disburdenment and disengagement.\(^5\) A culture of instrumentality has been overpowering our world in an effort to simplify and control, but “in the process we extinguish the life

\(^4\) Ibid 40 \\
\(^5\) Ibid 43
of things and lose touch with them”.  

The dynamic of life is more than mechanical, says Borgmann. It includes art, wonder, joy, enthusiasm and judgement. Borgmann cautions that generally in our analysis of the repercussions of technology, we do not sufficiently focus on understanding and judging the end results, but primarily on the means, or the technological process itself. Technology has a “reductionist tendency” where it pushes us to reduce not only our sense of technology, but perhaps our life as a whole, to merely the means. We need to redefine ourselves and how we deal with technology. Often in technology the means take over the end and we become victims of the same technology that was meant to serve us. In actual fact, the ends are equally important. The means can at times change dramatically and it doesn’t change the end - all at once. The repercussions may not appear for years, or even decades later. The distinction between means and end that has arisen from the technological world blurs our insights, relating to the repercussions of our behaviour. Ends are no longer clear and the means are seen as simply functions of efficiency and not reconciled with traditions or deeper values.

“But ends cannot be kept firm when means are relativized, nor can problems remain articulate when their context is erased. Ends and problems, so treated, are attenuated to commodities until they almost disappear and there is nearly nothing.”

Technology is both the means and the end. It is about social structures as well as machines. If we only look at the machines when we are trying to understand technology, we will continue to have a distorted view. We tend to consider

---

6 Ibid 59
7 Ibid 66
machines as being simply disposable and transient. Technology is much more deeply imbedded in our society with longer term, ongoing consequences.

3.2 Technology as a Promise

Technology today is seen as a vital part of our everyday lives and our sense of cultural liberalization. It is an essential element that signifies the democratisation of society by giving access to more for more. Self-determination and the desire to arrest power from nature are now part of the technological culture of our civil and personal psyche. It has gone beyond the yearning for enlightenment and improved standards of living which were primary motivators when technology was first introduced. The notion of a utilitarian relationship between work and technological growth that philosophers such as Bacon and Descartes had presented, where technology was not seen as merely a tool for power but a useful capacity that also provides a freedom for artistic creation, seems to have given way to a techno structure that is based on a faith that we can conquer nature and reduced toil.8

German philosopher Martin Heidegger suggests that technology is our destiny as humans, to help us overpower our weaknesses. However, he points out that at the same time, we have choices and that there are ramifications for our choices. Heidegger sees modern technology as, “the final stage of metaphysics, as prefigured by Nietzsche.”9

---

8 Ibid 35
9 Ibid 40
For a personal awareness of the impact of the promise of technology, one might perhaps look at the daring challenge of a modern day prophet like Wendell Berry. Berry is a lot more critical of technology and is resigned to the notion that redemption of a technological world is near impossible. In his extreme critique of modern American society he is relentless in his opposition to technology. Wendell Berry’s call presents us with a real tension. How can we reconcile our reality, a modern obsession with technology and efficiency, with Berry’s call to rediscover a purer connection with our world, our lives and our souls?

Berry feels that we live with an illusion that technology has set us free by improving our lives and releasing us from drudgery. While the concept of a free market has created an illusion of overall personal freedom, our ability to make our own choices however, has decreased significantly. Berry asks a very poignant question: is our work life as part of a technological machine more dignified than in the past? In talking about the “freedom” of women to work in factories or corporations as opposed to in their homes, Berry states:

“They are more compliant than most housewives have been. Their characters combine feudal submissiveness with modern helplessness. They have accepted without protest, and often with relief, their dispossessment of any usable property and, with that, their loss of economic independence and their consequent subordination to bosses.”

Has technology not shifted us from a feudal form of submission to a “modern helplessness”? Technology has allowed most of us to support other people’s economic ends and to put real power into fewer hands. We are attached to

---

10 Wendell Berry, *The Art of The Common Place*, Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2002 p70
work which is most often not fulfilling and we seek happiness outside of it through vacations, weekend retreats and other concepts of escape. We are consumed by consumerism and are trapped in a wheel of spending and working simply to find relief through buying more and more. Is this freer than the life on a farm or a local marketplace where the craft of creating and the joy of living were not separated?

3.3 Technology and Liberal Democracy

In a society driven by capitalism and commerce, technology has been promoted by marketers as a suggested key that defines our liberation and enrichment. Its availability and the availability of what it makes, has become a way for society to interpret and describe its success. Early on the “things” that we made became inseparable from the “devices” that made them. The machinery structure became synonymous with the commodities that it created. The concept of the means to an end became a way to relate to the freedom that came by having access to the devices. These devices became a language that made technology a way to measure success within a liberal democracy.

Albert Borgmann asks if the promise of technology has shifted and questions under what terms do we now see technology as a success and at what cost? 11 Can the promise of technology be kept and is it worth keeping? Today the development of technology, particularly its excesses, has clouded our understanding of what liberty and prosperity mean. We need to look at how and

11 Albert Borgmann, Technology and the Character of Contemporary Life, A philosophical Inquiry, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1984 p 38
in which way, the development of our sense of prosperity has indeed shaped and informed the world.

Technology and our society are propelled by a drive for upward mobility, which is something that the pre-technical world didn’t have. Albert Borgmann points out that liberal democracy offers an ideal social ethos that stimulates technology and that in return, technology plays a vital part in delivering the heart of the liberal democratic promise.

In summary, Borgmann tells us that liberal democracy seems to be a, “distinctive convergence of the notions of liberty, equality and self-realization”, which seems to be at one with the instrumental notion or concepts of technology. 12 Freedom, liberty and equality are core to the notion of liberal democracy, but it is self-realization that allows a society of unequal strengths and varied talents to work together. This notion of equality according to Borgmann, supports the right of each individual to pursue the good life and such a concept is at one with the promise of technology. Technology, in effect, helps the individual obtain what is needed for this ideal life and therefore becomes a tool for the individual to work towards going beyond his or her limits. This is the most sacred sense of freedom in our society and technology is at the heart of what enables it. The lower class will have tomorrow what the upper class has today. Unfortunately, by the time they have it its novelty will have worn off.

12 Ibid p 86
Wendell Berry is much more critical of the “American Dream” than the more philosophical Borgmann. While Brogmann, a Catholic, remains open to the possibility of grace within a technological milieu, Berry, a Southern Protestant, is more absolute and tends to engage with an either/or attitude.

Berry believes that in many ways Americans were and still are very susceptible to the allure of technology and most vulnerable to being detached from their land and their true connection with the natural order. For the most part, the people who arrived on American shores did not feel they “belonged” to the new land, but were from the start anxious to exploit their discovery and make things happen.

“The idea was that when faced with abundance one should consume abundantly – an idea that has survived to become the basis of our present economy. …Because they belonged to no place, it was almost inevitable that they should behave violently toward the places they came to.”

Berry best exemplifies this in his description of how a road differs from a path. The latter is well trodden in a naturally evolved manner, in concert with the environment in which it lies. A road on the other hand, destroys and cares not for the place it traverses but is merely obsessed with getting to the ultimate destination, with maximum speed and efficiency. The objective of the early Americans, like the freeways they eventually built was not to nurture, but to move swiftly having no relationship with the locale through which they trod. The pioneers were motivated by gold and not a homeland. This reality became an incubator for greed that ultimately was ripe for the allure of technological

---


14Ibid, p12
progress and the empire building drive of capitalism. Ultimately all became victims of the new land which they exploited.

“The only escape from this destiny of victimization has been to succeed’- that is, to ‘make it’ into the class of exploiters, and then to remain so specialized and so ‘mobile’ as the unconscious of the effects of one’s life or livelihood.”¹⁵

Unless one “made it”, according to Berry, one was not a true American. The new world culture was all about expansion, revolution and victory. This became the foundation of American history and the exploitive society that fuelled capitalism which in turn reinforced the norm. Technological development did not seem in itself to be a new tool that could be utilized prudently and monitored at a bit of distance. Instead it became a mania, a manifestation of the heart of the American reality and a symbol of its success.

3.4 Technology and the Device Paradigm

Devices changed the way we see things and the way we access our world. For Albert Borgmann, an understanding of this device paradigm provides a good methodology in helping us understand modern technological society. According to Borgmann, instead of our world being “present” to us directly through feelings and emotions, technology created awareness that everything around us was being based on a series of “things” or commodities. Furthermore, these commodities are only available to us through devices - devices that we do not understand and that represent the superficial surface of machinery.

“… the relatedness of the world is misplaced by a machinery, but the machinery is concealed, and the commodities, which are made available

¹⁵ Ibid, p7
by a device, are enjoyed without the encumbrance of, or the engagement with a context."\textsuperscript{16}

Borgmann suggests that most people are illiterate when it comes to technology and that we don’t actually want to see the mechanics of our machinery. We don’t want to understand and therefore aren’t able to repair the devices that make up our reality. We just want to have “friendly” equipment that never rusts and does not need to be understood in detail. The writer argues that it is very difficult to study the content and effect of technology as its nature in our society does not invite appropriation, or if you wish, a relationship where we care for it and emotionally engage. Technology does not reflect its creator or the place of its origin. If the end is consumption and pleasure, the “device” is the means, but the actual machinery is well hidden behind the device itself. The device paradigm commoditises our lives and brings all such commodities into the superficial foreground veneer of technology. It transforms everything into a commodity, including nature and social relations.\textsuperscript{17} Labour itself is seen as a device.

To demonstrate Borgmann gives the example of wine which is now understood based on its processing and chemical constituents. Through this device approach, such an understanding appears to be less risky because wine is less and less seen as connected with geography, climate and human input.\textsuperscript{18} As a philosopher, Borgmann looks for a pattern in a process that contains human


\textsuperscript{17} Ibid p 48

\textsuperscript{18} Ibid p 48
behaviour. He finds that pattern in the device paradigm, which represents the change of perception and judgement in humans over time, from “things” to “commodities”. Borgmann believes that this paradigm has actually redefined democracy and placed all commodities onto an equal plane, including the commoditization of such things as leadership, politics, education and religion. Taste itself has changed through the changed perceptions of what matters. The origins and quality of things are no longer important but are concealed in the machinery behind the veneer of the devices. Things are removed from place and time. Borgmann argues that there is little depth in the foreground of technology and hence our navigation through its manifestations is based not on tradition, experience or profound wisdom, but on the surface messaging of advertising and marketing.

“In advertising, the foreground comes most sharply and prominently into focus. …The availability of commodities comes to the fore in advertising. But the relation between availability and advertising requires further analysis. It is certain that advertising serves limited utilitarian purposes such as supplying information and increasing sales. But this is a partial explanation of the phenomenon since the informative content of advertisements are low and the competitive struggle in advertising should lead to a standoff.”19

Borgmann clarifies that it is not advertising itself, but the technological promise of the mid-19th century that has led to universal demand for consumption.

Advertising is merely a public language that “regulates” the culture. 20

Commodities, according to Borgmann, offer a very narrow aspect of happiness.

Born to us through our endless search for more and more devices, advertisers

19 Ibid p52
20 Ibid p53
merely heighten the superficial characteristics of these devices. Ultimately Borgmann asks, if we have become so comfortable with the construct of commodities and the connection with our reality is so defined in that way, then we are actually commoditizing our own selves.

3.5 Technology and Work
Borgmann refers to German social theorist Jurgen Habermas, who suggests that one can understand and compare societies by examining their notion and approach to work. In traditional societies, interaction was more important than the work itself and there was never any lack of clarity about the purpose of the work. In a capitalist world, free market ideology has been the primary driver of how human interaction is experienced. The traditional world views are criticized as ideologies. The world view today does not start from a higher authority or a supreme sense of goodness, but from structural day to day realities like labour, trade and transportation systems. By dismissing the traditional approach, according to Habermas, the system camouflages the signs of its own inadequacy. This drive for technological control and its centrality is what Habermas calls, “The Scientifization of Technology”. Borgmann builds on the views of Habermas and argues that the “technocratic consciousness” is more than a tool and that work itself is not merely an instrument of the structure. An instrumentalist attitude towards work would make technology merely a functional aspect of the same instrumentalist system. While Borgmann agrees with Habermas that “communicated competence” is needed to lead a social sense of

---

21 Ibid p98
22 Ibid p99
what goodness is, he points out that this discussion must include an awareness that technology, while appearing to be merely a tool, also informs our viewpoint going into those discussions in deeper ways. ²³ If technology is seen merely as a tool, it is too easy to rationalize it as acceptable in its totality and in its flaws with no understanding of how it is a manifestation of us and how it further shapes our world. Analysis and discussion about technology as a driving architect of our work environment help to limit and contain its potential harm. Borgmann argues that our current approach to understanding our work would no longer be seen as adequate or acceptable if technology itself is no longer setting the framework of social order, defining at least partially, our sense of goodness. ²⁴

Wendell Berry resists the dualism between thinking and feeling. He also challenges other divides in human consciousness including the split of private versus public, political versus religious and work versus leisure. This is a result of our mechanical view of our humanity, as encouraged by the technological society that we have created. Such a tendency to dualism has also made it easier to entrench the separation of work and worker that is a result of the ongoing obsession with increased technological efficiency and dispensable workers. Wendell Berry feels by losing our vocations we are losing our birthright and destroying our cultures. As he puts it, unless we perform the task that we are best fitted for, there is no justice. By robbing us of such connection with our calling, technology is destroying the spirit of the person.

²³ Ibid p101
²⁴ Ibid p 101
“...the loss of the principle of vocation is probably the most symptomatic and, from a cultural standpoint, the most critical. It is by replacement of vocation with economic determinism that the exterior workings of a total economy destroy human character and culture from the inside.”

For Berry, to work is to pray. Work is creative, work is pleasure and work is life. Ultimately the whole nature of existence has been shifted into becoming merely a segment of a big machine. Humans are interchangeable parts and work is informed by the technological needs. Workers are not generally called into a role that matches their abilities. Berry asks the questions. What is our work for? What, if we weren’t in this particular place and time, would nature be doing? For Berry, work should not be about exploitation, but about thinking and more about living and indeed, loving

3.6 Technology and Progress

Wendell Berry’s critiques of technology are based fundamentally on his perception of foundational evils and how they contribute to human understanding. He does not primarily critique in an empirical experiential way. Generally, technology has led to a misconception of what is genuinely better for us as humans and what we deeply yearn for. The need to belong, to love, to be productive in harmony with nature, and to have joy in a holistic manner have been replaced as ideals, by the characteristics which drive industrial capitalism. The concept that faster, bigger, vaster and mightier should be the driving ideals

26 Ibid p34
27 Ibid, p34
in our lives and our economies, has numbed us from what is really important to be human\textsuperscript{28}.

To point out the technological fallacy, Wendell Berry makes a point of not using a computer almost as a form of living parable. In his essay, \textit{Why I am not going to use a computer}, the author tells us:

\begin{quote}
“I do not see that computers are bringing us one step nearer to anything that does matter to me: peace, economic justice, ecological health, political honesty, family and community stability, good work.”\textsuperscript{29}
\end{quote}

Berry questions why we feel that writing, or anything we create is going to be better, based on the technology used. He points out that a computer removes the human, tactile connection with the words and that when we use a computer, something vital is missing – the history, the errors, the changes, and the energy of the physical act of writing. Technology has no memory within itself. All the materials used are merely applied, always one step removed from the person responsible for the application and they are therefore, according to Berry, not tangibly connected. Be it a table, a painting or a meal, technological progress has meant that the producer, while making it faster, is not necessarily making it with more passion, nor with a direct ability to appreciate the fruit of his or her labour. \textsuperscript{30}

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{28} Ibid, p 72
\textsuperscript{30} Wendell Berry, \textit{The Art of The Common Place}, Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2002, p77
\end{flushright}
In addition to faster, the other obsession of a modern technological world is that more is better. Wendell Berry points out that while we pay attention to quantity, we may not realize that the overall qualitative aspect of our lives is not increasing in a similar manner. More food has led to pollution and soil losses. More household goods have been accompanied by inferior workmanship. An inundation of communication has been accompanied by a diminished education level in our society.

“But in general, apart from its own highly specialized standards of quantity and efficiency, ‘technological progress’ has produced a social and ecological decline…..After several generations of ‘technological progress’ in fact, we have become a people who cannot think about anything important. How far down in the natural order do we have to go to find creatures?

Who raise their young as indifferently as industrial humans do now?”

People’s interests have been trivialized. They seem to know less about responsibility and their cultural identity than ever in the history of civilization.

Berry also comments on our attitude towards health and healthcare. We are obsessed with prolonging life as long as possible, to the point of mechanically “fixing” specific ailments that challenge our desire for longevity. A technological approach has led to a health care system that is primarily surgical. Much of our medical establishment and many of our medical institutions do not deal holistically with the overall healing and nurturing of a person. They focus mainly on the components that make a human body more machine-like, in a relatively sterile environment more conducive to mechanically fixing things rather than aiding people. Is this really better?

---

31 Ibid, p72
32 Ibid, p150
3.7 Technology: Philosophy Versus Science

Albert Borgmann seeks a philosophy of technology, hoping to build fundamental building blocks which can help explain the reasons behind our choices. This philosophy looks at technology as an extension of the system in which it is imbedded and an extension of human capacity that is manifest through the manufacturing of artefacts. This view is not only focussed on the tools themselves, but on the methodology of how they are applied. For Borgmann, technology itself is value neutral. To understand it, one must determine the guiding values that are at the core of how technology is used and not only what it is. It is not merely a tool, but technology gets significance through what we put into it and how we engage with it. Borgmann strongly differentiates between modern technology and pre-technological tools. Only now are such tools so widely available and only now are the means and ends so interwoven.\(^\text{33}\) It is in this broad interwoven society where liberal democracy and technology are one and where the currency of superficial devices dominates our measurement of progress, that Borgmann seeks his answers. While looking at a philosophy, Borgmann focuses not on the narrow aspects of technology or on micro examples of its harm, but seeks to dissect the system itself. And, by doing so, he understands how we engage in both the means and the end. According to Borgmann:

“A penetrating enquiry of technology must inevitably be a social critique…The instrumentalist approach is in one way unassailable. Any

\(^{33}\) Albert Borgmann, Technology and the Character of Contemporary Life, A philosophical Inquiry, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1984 p10
concretely delimited piece of technology can be put forward as a value-neutral tool.\(^{34}\)

Technology has diluted our social structures including the influence of power and the leadership role of politics. It has eroded radical distinctions between socialism and capitalism, union and management and private and public. For Borgmann, understanding the effects of technology is about understanding process – process of thinking, social activities and what drives us in our pursuit of the creation of objects.

An understanding of technology is about understanding our application of the technology we create and not about the scientific laws and theories behind them. Laws and theories, according to Borgmann, like technology, are also neutral, while systems of application show human attributes and motives. Modern science analyses laws and breaks them down in small bits. It attempts to gives us a detailed look at what we know about life. But, has science given us a more detailed understanding of the ramifications of technology? Does scientific law give meaning to our experience? The historical narratives of society are not usually based solely on laws. To understand a world, it helps to have an appreciation of science, but one must also be apart from it in order to reflect more deeply. A physiological understanding of our world is not enough. While people respect science, they tend not to understand its limitations. Even though most people know little of science or technological breakthroughs, there seems to be a general acceptance of the way things are as long as the direction is perceived as a scientific one.

\(^{34}\) Ibid p10
An era of confidence and a sense of control often lead to a scientific worldview even though the majority of people remain for the most part ignorant of the validity of the scientific theories, let alone their social ramifications. A more resigned approach within a culture with a less certain demeanour, tends to lead to more reliance on religious structures and the search for fundamental truths. In reality, one needs both – deeper insights as well as empirical data when it is available. In this new world order where a scientific approach dominates, where science has now lost its connection with metaphysical and spiritual reflection, where politicians consult not with artists, theologians and philosophers, but exclusively with scientists and economists, are we not missing an important orientation? Has technology not suspended the authority of dialogue and seeking in all of us? Science and technology on their own, do not seek to operate in a principled manner and they do not celebrate the awesomeness of creation, or the wonder of our lives.

3.8 Technology and Creation

Wendell Berry’s sense of creation is founded on the premise that we are all connected and in our purest, most harmonious form, are all the embodiment of God. The purest form of these creations by a supernatural God can in fact, best be experienced and understood within the holiness of nature and our sensual response to it. We must be humble and full of awe in front of nature and thus feel like we are part of creation.
“And that requires that we make the effort to know the world and to learn what is good for it. We must learn to cooperate in its process and to yield to its limits. But even more important we must learn to acknowledge that creation is full of mystery; we will never entirely understand it. We must abandon arrogance and stand in awe. We must recover the sense of the majesty of creation and the ability to worship in its presence. For I do not doubt that it is only on the condition of humility and reverence before the world that our species will be able to remain in it.” 35

That experience for Berry is rooted in the soil itself within a particular place and time. For Berry, the natural and the local are manifestations of the holiness that each of us have as our potential. Anything that removes us from the natural simplicity and perfection of our environment, is also taking us away from our true roles in creation, from our inner holiness and from God.

“It is free of the strivings and dissatisfactions, the partialities and imperfections of places under the mechanical dominance of man. …Where the creation is whole nothing is extraneous. The presence of creation here makes this a holy place and it is as a pilgrim that I have come. It is the creation that has attracted me, its perfect interfusion of life and design.”36

For Wendell Berry, technology inevitably is at the top of the list of negative forces. He sees it as a seductive product of man’s greed and obsession with power. We have been driven out of the garden, seeking to ultimately have the power of God within ourselves. The world of science that has consumed us with the desire to be in control and ultimately godlike, has led to an uncertain existence which is always in transition and never rooted. This is not what we were created for. God intended us instead to be relational connected beings. Wendell calls us to withdraw from our gluttonous obsession and pull ourselves back towards the true mystery of creation.


36 Ibid: p 24
Chapter 4
The Shadow of Technology

In this chapter, we will look at some of the general criticisms that Borgmann and Berry present relating to technology. Berry examines the personal, the local and the spiritual and we will first look at how he relates technology to his sense of human sinfulness. We will then look at Borgmann’s general concern about technology in five categories: a distorted world view, the rewriting of our values, disengagement and alienation, public private divide and finally, the shortcomings of technology’s ability to self-analyse.

4.1 Technology and Sin

Berry understands human beings to have an innate destructiveness that is driven by greed and that we are totally open to be manipulated by and to manipulate.37 In our modern society this sinfulness is most evident in our dependence on an economic model: a model that is built on the principle of the most for the least and an obsession with global exploitation in the search for cheap labour, energy and materials. Our sin is that we do not see the world as a community of communities that are all interdependent. We have lost track of the production process and the effect it has on our world.

“...the great destructiveness of the industrial age comes from a division, a sort of divorce in our economy between production and consumption. Of this radical division of function we can say...that the aim of producers is to sell as much as possible and that the aim of consumers is to buy as much as possible....”38

37 Ibid, p 28
38 Ibid, p 246
We have become trapped within our own technological inventions, the ones that have been created as a response to our unending drive for “more”. Although we may at times get a glimpse of the spiritual and ethical costs related to our ways, we have still become dependent on the very same technology that was meant to set us free. Everything old is considered to be without value and is superseded by the newer and improved present. Technology, which was intended for good has fallen prey to man’s sinfulness and is used for evil, including war, control and furthering injustice. We have lost track in our lives of the difference between our wants and our needs. We’ve lost the sense of responsibility for the price of this ambivalence.

“This is an educated confusion. Modern education systems have pretty consciously encouraged young people to think of their wants as needs.”

We believe that everything is quantifiable and progress is about the present giving way to the future and ignoring the past. We judge ourselves based on a cost benefit analysis that is devoid of considering the social costs or understanding of our core values. Our understanding of sinfulness is mainly limited to concepts that are quantifiable, i.e. money.

4.2 Technology and a Distorted World View

In his article *On Worldviews*, James H. Olthuis suggests that our society is undergoing a worldview crisis caused by ongoing social issues in our personal and communal lives. Such issues can be blamed on numerous challenges of


40 Ibid, p18

41 Ibid, p 35
recent times, including physical dislocation of immigrant families, emotional stress caused by alienation at work, a sense of social abandonment etc.

Olthuis further argues that if we are unable to reshape our reality in some way, breakdown, both socially and personally will ensue. What we tend to do is 'dislocate' this anxiety and develop new temporary worldviews that are self-serving and at least make our life tolerable.\(^\text{42}\) Albert Borgmann likewise argues that our distorted worldview of our lives can be primarily blamed on our distorted view of our technologically dominated life. Technology, which is both structural and machinery, is often understood only through the machines and more specifically through the devices which are on the surface that are aimed at fulfilling our demand for immediate ease and pleasure. However, machines are transient and this nature encourages a sense of restlessness. As mentioned, Borgmann states that the laws of science do not provide sufficient context for why we make the choices that we do and often leave us with a world view that is not sufficient to create a personal identity, nor determine whether or not our action is for the good. According to Borgmann, it is impossible to simply put the universe into an all-embracing empirical system of laws. Even basic social interaction between humans in their familiar natural environment is impossible to predict. Borgmann contends that social science cannot predict elections, or inflation, let alone social happiness.\(^\text{43}\) Borgmann insists that our empirical world view and our obsession with deductive reasoning do not provide us with the


\(^{43}\) Albert Borgmann, Technology and the Character of Contemporary Life, A philosophical Inquiry, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1984 p70
whole picture. He states, that despite our technological obsession, we have not ended up with a homogenous static world, but one that is constantly changing and varied. In order to understand this constant change, he insists that we need to look at predominant patterns and seek paradigmatic explanations while acknowledging that they continue to evolve. We need to look around us to see the uniqueness of what it means to be human, even though technology makes us believe that there is nothing specific for the social sciences to articulate further. Such a paradigm, according to Borgmann, can be applied to matters that are not concrete and never complete. It is a way in which a group of social theorists see things, while acknowledging that they are always steps away from reality and not meant to provide a scientific explanation. Science tends to make us forget the scientific roots of why we are where we are and simply analyses the specifics of today’s reality. Borgmann criticizes modern social scientists for having been taken over by a similar scientific obsession with certainty and attempting to predict the future of social dynamics, even though failure at doing so continues. He argues that this allegiance to a technological paradigm has motivated social science to attempt to have all the answers, whereas in fact, social paradigms are as non-demonstrable as metaphysical ones. For Borgmann, social paradigms may at times be helpful as they can encourage a reflection on our world and help us find commonality with others. However, they may also contribute to the restraint the development of our attendance to other areas of thinking.
4.3 Technology and Our Values

Borgmann argues that technology has distorted our sense of values. It has distanced us from our world and our sense of place in our village and universe. He explains that this lack of connectedness to a particular place actually started with the discoveries of Copernicus and that since then, our terms of reference and our sense of unquestionable standards have slowly been diminished. Have technology and our relationship to it become the new standard? Value has become measured by how much benefit something can be to the individual. We have shifted from values that build on customs and traditions to ones that focus on goals and ambitions towards the future. Our life is about an obsession with adjectives such as ‘more, larger, prosperous, efficient, easy’, etcetera. Likewise, our sense of freedom and equality as promoted within liberal democracy are also driven by self-interest and ambition. This worldview has created patterns that push us to connect with commodities in an obsessive manner as if they are the only way to demonstrate what it means to be free, disguising the effects that this obsession has on other aspects of our lives. We persuade ourselves that technology is meant to bring these values from the few to the many and yet we seem oblivious to the fact that this has not been accomplished and that our real interest is our self-gain. Education has, according to Borgmann, been overshadowed by functional illiteracy.

“Scores of national tests measuring scholastic proficiencies are declining. Voter turnout continues to fall. Obesity is a national problem. The television programs that critics like the least are being watched by the most. Foreign aid as a share of the federal budget and the gross national

44 Ibid p80
product, has been decreasing for a generation. The gap between the rich and poor countries and between the rich and poor with this country is widening. There is a strident tone to politics within this country and one of increasing belligerence towards our foreign policy.\textsuperscript{45}

What does it mean to pursue excellence in our society? How do we spend our leisure time? Technology has given us tough decisions to make. Do we want greater affluence or more free time? We believe, thanks to technological progress, that we have the luxury of a free time not enjoyed by previous generations, but we may not be looking at the complete picture. Borgmann explains that in 1850 the average household was headed by one worker and that worker, usually male, worked about 70 hours weekly. When you take into consideration that back then, only one person supported the household whereas now, a household has two breadwinners, this means more work added onto the day job because of sharing household chores. Add to that the longer commute times, plus the extra hours worked at home to keep up with the workload of many jobs, as well as in some cases, the need to moonlight in order to live in the social strata for which we strive - we actually have significantly less free time. Borgmann points out that most people believe that we are very fortunate based on technology and its promises. In order to assess technology and channel it towards goodness, we must pull back and evaluate its propensity, or more importantly, the propensity of liberal democracy, to advertise an unequivocal success story despite the fact that many such claims are unfounded. We have been thrust into the device paradigm that feeds on itself, pushing us to move forward and looking at the past with disdain. The past is looked at as an age of

\textsuperscript{45} Ibid p127
powerlessness, strain and social underdevelopment. Today, so we believe, we could no longer cope with an era where we opened our own garage door, or laboriously pushed a non-electric lawn mower. Our success today is not seen or gained through real self-improvement, but only as a result of machinery that is available to us - machinery that we may, or may not understand. These technological accomplishments quickly give way to complacency and boredom. We become obsessed and anxious to pursue more promises and more endeavours that seem to be limited only by space and time. Borgmann tells us that this leads to frivolity, furthering the disconnect between means and ends with increasingly diminished returns. We do so without any real evaluation of the costs to our community, our environment and our own self-fulfillment.

Borgmann points at entertainment as a particular commodity that seems to have no limits. We have gluttonously developed an endless supply of visuals, music, shows, and diversions in general. Novelty and quantity, according to Borgmann, have replaced quality. He cautions that the entertainment industry has mined a source that may ultimately become depleted and that is the mine of social morals and sexual taboos. Much of what was culturally deemed as unmentionable in the past, is now not only discussed, but exploited. Topics that in the past were dealt with in private in order to protect a sense of human dignity and to maintain social order are now packaged openly through the technological machinery. In a device paradigm, social order focuses only on the production and consumption of commodities. The translated taboos are no longer hidden but become available

46 Ibid p140
to exploit. Borgmann argues however, that taboos too are limited. For them to be effective there must be an underlying morality that continues to define them as taboos. Hence we keep pushing the limits, raising the bar of sensation and titillation. Borgmann says that, ultimately, if left unquestioned our moral fabric will, like natural resources, be depleted entirely.

Albert Borgmann posits that television represents the perfect example of the superficial promise of technology. It aims to free us from the limitations of space, time and ignorance and allows all of us to feel, albeit temporarily, powerful and brilliant. To make the most of our leisure time we attempt to consume as many devices as we can in the limited time we have. This leads to a hectic and tense life and technology continues to challenge the psychology of humans and the fabric of life. In the digital revolution of the 21st century, we are yet again being promised that our world will be better if we put our trust in technology. However, will technology solve world poverty or conquer disease and global illiteracy?

Why then has it not already succeeded in doing those things?

4.4 Disengagement and Alienation

Wendell Berry believes that as humans we are meant to live in a local community and that we can relate best within a micro, local economy. In such a world, people are connected to the land, to the families and to the product they make. Furthermore, he feels that without local agriculture in its purest form, such a connection with community is threatened and we as human beings will not survive.
The effect of technology on our relationship with the land is of paramount importance to Wendell Berry. The uninhibited application of what Berry calls a “war technology”, aimed at expanding a global economy and developing cheaper forms of energy and food, implicitly ignores the real losses that are not immediately accountable for in dollars.

“There is no mention of land loss, of soil erosion, of pollution of land, air and water or of the various threats to biological diversity – all problems of generally (and scientifically) recognized gravity.”

Berry is perplexed as to why these matters continue to not seem grave to us. He points out that subsidies and regulations aimed at supporting and guiding new technological growth, do not address the vulnerability of the food production system. Many of the foundations of agriculture are being destroyed, such as natural fertilization, solar energy, localized genetics, and natural weed and pest control. Instead, the small farm is being turned into a unit that is not at all self-sustaining but dependent upon corporations and a global economy. Most people are ignoring the tangible connection with farming and instead are empowering corporations to provide their food, clothing and shelter. Inexpensive transportation has become a vital element of a new global colonialism that transports food thousands of miles. This means that economic self-sufficiency in a local area is no longer competitive or feasible. The farms and communities with a broad local production capacity, with local diversity and with local

---


48 Ibid, p.12

49 Ibid, p 69
independence are gone because of the technological capacity to produce more efficiently and transport long distances.

That detachment from our earthly roots has further extended into other aspects of our lives, such as entertainment, education, child care, care of the elderly and other human priorities that were in the past provided by the same local household at much less cost. Such cost was not measured only in dollars. Today we have various empirical ways of measuring the productivity without realizing the impact of degraded farming communities, failing ecosystem regeneration, and perishing communities.

Wendell Berry feels that technology has drawn us away from our land and community, but, consequently, also from our values and feelings.

“…this is the orthodox assumption of the industrial economy- that the only help worth giving is not given at all, but sold. Love, friendships, neighbourliness, compassion, duty-what are they…this long sequence of industrial innovations has changed human life and even human nature in fundamental way….but arguably, almost always for the worse”50

When we do find ourselves facing the reality of environmental problems or a spiritual void, the solutions we seek focus on specific issues and we delegate the search for “fixing things” to specialists. This approach is yet another form of corporate and mechanical behaviour, separate from us and for Berry, this is what technology has done to us. It has removed us from our place on our land and from our own inner selves. Without a sense of personal attachment to our world,

50 Wendell Berry, The Art of The Common Place, Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2002, p72
we are less able to feel the issues in our hearts and turn such feeling into real empathic practice.

“If people begin the effort to take back into their own power a significant portion of their economic responsibility, then their inevitable first discovery is that the ‘environmental crisis’ is no such thing; it is not a crisis of our environs or surroundings; it is a crisis of our lives as individuals, as family members, as community members, and as citizens.”  

Berry’s love of the land is a reaffirmation of his focus on the importance of being connected to a particular place. What is even more important for Berry, is that we put ourselves in a place and situation that is both given to us and that we choose to accept. Making a choice to listen to the call and to authentically live in and accept a community is for Wendell Berry, a conversion process that changes our personhood. If we look beyond the technological agenda, one which displaces us and our environment, we can reconnect with the land and nature. For Berry this is not about winning or conquering a place with our powerful infrastructure, but about belonging and being affectionate. Technology gives us the illusion of being the centre of the world and yet we find ourselves not being part of anything at all. We have lost touch with the mystery of life. Only our hearts and inner selves can root us again.

“…one’s love gradually responds to the place as it really is and one’s visions gradually image possibilities that are really in it. …what one wants can become the same as what one has, and one’s knowledge can cause respect of what one knows.”

---


Albert Borgmann also invites us to rethink our engagement in our world, but by examining the device paradigm and understanding that it and technology have not fulfilled any of their superficial promises. We still live in a world of toil, poverty, and suffering. The transformative promise has been unfulfilled and yet we are alienated from our labour, working under an illusion of freedom and progress. Borgmann, like Berry, argues that technology’s promise of liberation through disburdenment has meant disengagement and our only sense of enrichment is through diversion and distraction. “Conquest makes way first to domination and then to loneliness”.\[^{53}\] As discussed, all we see are the commodities. They are the foreground and the machinery is hidden. We replace the depth of our potential with shallow commodities that are easily disposable:

“A commodity is available when it is at our disposal without burdening us in any way, i.e. when it is commodiously present, instantaneously, ubiquitously, safely and easily.”\[^{54}\]

This has become the guiding pattern of our world. For Borgmann the device pattern itself is a clear demonstration of our disengagement.

Borgmann states that technology in itself is intrinsically passive. It is not creative or interactive. In a major effort to change this passive nature of technology, Borgmann suggests that we are doing so by creating a hyper-reality through electronic games, mobile apps and websites. He suggests that this attempt to solve the disengagement through technology as demonstrated in the creation of hybrid worlds, ironically, further accentuates the disengagement. Reality itself

\[^{53}\] Albert Borgmann, Technology and the Character of Contemporary Life, A philosophical Inquiry, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1984 p76
\[^{54}\] Ibid p77
becomes blurred. This electronic affinity with hyper-reality and technology’s partnership with the drive of liberal democracy to create more commodities to help fill the void, is leading to even more disengagement, not only from our skills, but from our capacity for human interaction. Increased distraction leads to a scattering of focus. Used in this way, technology, according to Borgmann, does not help us excel, but encourages us to exploit.

“It is already apparent that the new video technology is not used by people as the crucial aid that finally allows them to develop into the historians, critics, musicians, sculptors or athletes that they have always wanted to be. Rather the main consequence of this technological development appears to be the spread of pornography.”

Simple, accessible computers continue to split the commodity from the machine, while making us even more dependent on the machinery while making us more detached from our world.

4.5 Public and Private Division

Albert Borgmann argues that technology has created a split between what is private and what is public. Two polarities that, while co-existing, are kept apart and at quite a distance. He argues that public space for example, has developed in a much grander way than the old village square, but is devoid of the dignity that social celebrations held in the past. Meanwhile, there has evolved a much more poignant notion of privacy where the greater society is not seen as a broad family or community. Post-industrial society evolved from the personal and relational, to the impersonal. Borgmann acknowledges that this evolution presented a mixture of advantages and disadvantages. He gives as an example,

55 Ibid p51
56 Ibid p63
the growth of department stores. With fixed prices, haggling was avoided and the comfortable sense of a fair deal was the norm. At the same time, transactions became impersonal and the salesperson was often merely a facilitator rather than a provider of service. Labour and industry became a public affair symbolized in broader society by imposing public structures like bridges, highways and skyscrapers. All of it was driven by an ambitious liberal economy which in turn was fuelled by advertising that pursued the agenda to the point of being fraudulent - an agenda of unlimited industry and the drive to acquire more.

Borgmann argues that a divide between our public and private lives is, today, a naturally accepted way of being. In political and economic language these divisions are called “sectors”. Borgmann suggests that by situating public matters apart from our personal lives, we are able to hide the implication of, and the accountability that we may have for technology. It appears that accountability is limited to a private realm and there is no longer as much communal negotiation of meaning and value of our shared world. Meaning and value have primarily become a private affair. Borgmann points out that when we call on technology to help us define and present a public experience, it turns social celebrations into a “sophisticated machinery” as is evident in the Olympics and major sports spectacles. This public/private divide disguises the implications of technology but it still bespeaks in a frustrated way, people’s desires for a kind of moral excellence.57 Traditions are limited to the private realm and to contrived and structured public pageantry, as well as technologically driven celebrations that

57 Albert Borgmann, Christianity in the Culture of Technology, Power Failure, Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2003 p45
are the heart of today’s common order. Our common order has been depleted from tradition, from the wisdom that comes with it and from a direct and personal accountability and connectedness with that sense of order.

4.6 Technology and Reverse Adaptation

One of the most important and unique characteristics of technology according to both Borgmann and Berry, is how it permeates itself into any debate about issues relating to its very existence. In other words, when disputes or discomforts arise, the preferred approach to dealing with the issues is a technological one. This hides the root of the problem and we are rarely able to reach the source of our unease. Both authors agree that we live in a time where ambiguity prevails and the only guideline seems to be that of technological standards. Our technological lifestyle is essentially blind to itself and we must look at the specific problems apart from the technological veneer, in order to open up the true texture of the tapestry of our lives. As the old is replaced by the new, we still somehow yearn for the essence of the past through nostalgia and simulated experience. Yet we are unable to understand what we are missing. Berry suggests that to understand this void and the moral consequence of technology, we must go outside of it.

Albert Borgmann describes three key examples of how we use technology to defend such technology in the face of apprehensions that arise. When we are concerned about human traits like egotism and laziness, technology tries to rename and rationalize these traits. This information turns negative categories

---

58 p 62
into positive attributes that are applauded by the system, repositioning them as self-confidence and efficiency and as drivers of paramount importance to the modern world. The second defence by technology is in the subtle shift in social currency. We have innately become suspicious of a life of consumption and there is, on occasion, a sense that this is not a worthy way to measure human dignity. So instead, our technological culture has suggested that a good life should not be defined though the strict measure of leisure or affluent consumption, but by our power positions in the labour force and our ability to procure commodities. As Borgmann puts it, a growing disappointment with the ends, yields to a growing fascination with and repositioning of the means.\(^{59}\) Finally Borgmann suggests that there is a growing sense of impoverishment and impatience in our technological world, a world that more and more is seen as impersonal and insensitive to the human desire for self-awareness. Again, Borgmann points out that to compensate for this technological malaise, the means continue to be modified and shifted, with new aspirations and new frontiers, new places to go and new benchmarks. Ultimately, this is merely a way of creating new instruments in flux. New, improved and “better” devices keep us in flux and become the definition of the ends themselves.

In this detached world, who then is responsible for the monitoring of technology and its problems? Executives have power only within the technological framework and can exercise such power only as long as they are feeding the creation of more commodities. “As long as technology as a whole is generally

\(^{59}\) Ibid p62
sanctioned, there is no need or possibility to adopt responsibility for technology as a whole.”

Public responsibility within our technological society tends to be limited to clear and trackable matters such as safety, efficiency and honesty of service. Authentic responsibility, according to both Borgmann and Berry, can only be discerned outside the system. We need to look at every aspect of our lives and understand that our role in society and each of our decisions are unique. However, in today’s society, technological culture has made it seem that there is nothing unique and there is nothing for us to articulate. Borgmann points out that the device paradigm is made up of matters that are not concrete and never completed. A technological structure may be one way in which a group of social theorists can attempt to see the world in which we live, but Borgmann argues that the technology itself prevents any of us to get truly close to reality. None of our social paradigms, cites Borgmann, can provide an adequate explanation and mode of assessment, as at the heart, there is a propensity to forget our search for the root of the human condition and look instead at the description of the social behaviour itself, as the fundamental reality. We must find a way to look beyond the obvious mechanical results of technology. We must look deeper and in a different language.

---

60 Ibid p63
61 Ibid p74
Chapter 5

The Effects of Technology on Spirituality

We have attempted to look at technology in a broad way, beyond the machinery and the mere mechanical and electronic efficiency that is at the core of its self-perpetuation. We have principally done so by examining technology more closely through two distinct yet complimentary lenses. Albert Borgmann outlined a model of a device paradigm, inherent in which are certain assumptions and negative consequences. Wendell Berry provided more of a sense of technology’s woes through the specific creative results in our lives.

Both however, pointed to major challenges including our distorted worldview, challenged values, alienation and the public private divide. Both argued that we cannot challenge modern views and technology using technology’s own standards and terms. We need a new dialogue. In this chapter we will look at technology specifically in its dialogue with spirituality.

5.1 Spirituality of Technology: The Challenge of Context

We have discussed that technology removes us from our sense of place and time. It alienates us from our work and from our productivity. It therefore can be a negative force in feeding the contextual culture of a spiritual life. James Olthuis points out that our worldview provides a framework and a channel that ‘give direction and meaning to life … it is the standard by which reality is managed and pursued’.

This has been largely shaped by our religious views, our social

---

values, and our sense of us as spiritual beings. Today, we are all still innately pulled by traditional ties, however our world is defined not by our stories of faith and sense of goodness, but more by a narrative of advertising, which as we discussed, is a communication device, used effectively within the commodity or device paradigm.

As Borgmann puts it, “In advertising, the promise of technology is presented both purely and concretely and hence most attractively. Problems and threats enter only as a background to set off the blessings of technology”. We are defined by this advertising and in the complexity of the ever developing technological world this product messaging is somehow providing a stabilizing force. Tradition is still yearned for however, but more and more seen as a skeletal memory of a pre-technological world. New, loose interpretations of tradition have taken over from the old archetypal stories and transformed the deep wisdom into the lowest common denominator: brandable, manageable and marketable devices. One need only look at society’s understanding of Christmas and Easter to see how the commoditisation of tradition has reduced these long standing narratives to being a mere function within the machinery.

Our social context has also become an inaccessible paradigm. Bureaucracy, machine-like politics, committee-run organizations and so on, are dealing with problems that call for the engagement of persons in relationship. A personal,

---

63 Albert Borgmann, Technology and the Character of Contemporary Life, A philosophical Inquiry, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1984p58
human element is missing. While government for instance, is built on traditional structures, the technological mindset has turned it into a tool. The “fix” or response to crises that we, through our government come up with, is, merely a technological fix. Spiritual nurturing of our tradition now, is more and more a private affair. Even our family units and the sense of the sanctity of our families are being challenged and attacked, as members are pulled by diverse technological and political priorities. In such a world, spirituality is combating generally accepted “politically correct”, predispositions, by being hidden in isolated pockets outside any context of the group. Spirituality itself is relegated to the private domain and only occasionally surfaces, self-consciously, in public foray.

5.2 Spirituality of Technology: Relationship with our World

We have discussed that technology, feeding the American dream of freedom and technological enabling, withdraws us from our work, our tradition, our family and our sense of place. This inevitably leads to a “freedom” to be lonely. In its effort to combat medieval inequality, the capitalist system uses competition and new forms of social inequality in order to propel the system further. Access to commodities is unequal, based on income, and this causes further tensions in our relationships. Lower classes now are driven in competition by the belief they can attain the status of higher classes. Motivating the lower classes to work harder and buy more only causes greater gulfs in the human dialogue. Technology actually further commoditises the inequality. The upward yearning
does not encourage people to associate with those below them. Those in lower classes tend to pay for economic declines, while the middle class is generally comfortable and therefore disengaged from issues relating to justice. Borgmann argues that while technology is generally inconsequential to social activism, it has a safety measure which helps balance any sense of unrest. The justice process itself is commoditized. This is not relational. The labour movement for example, according to Borgmann is compliant. All that is asked for is more money and more benefits. This can only be maintained as long as technology is advancing. Such progress says Borgmann, is detached from our sense of what it does to others, but becomes a type of social addiction. It is true that we have recently seen several significant examples that demonstrate how the communication capacity of modern technology has helped communities connect and help build momentum at a scale that in the past may have seemed unthinkable. One need only look at the recent Arab 'spring' revolution in Libya and Tunisia and the unprecedented support in the US for Barak Obama both of which were substantially driven by social media. These certainly show the potential for positive use of technology. However, one must also ask whether the nature of the change is deep enough, whether it is equally life affirming for the minorities in the community as well as the majority, and ultimately, whether the authenticity of the initial cry for justice has survived the ground swell of addictive, yet perhaps superficial power, driven by the very same addictive technology. Such shallowness and addiction are not enriching of the spiritual life, nor should they be characteristics of our religions either. Unfortunately there are many
examples within organized religious movements where the spiritual life too, has been commoditised, through such devices as indulgences, the business of self-help spirituality books and expensive lectures and tapes that promise to change your life.

Borgmann argues that as long as our social structures are commoditised, our political sphere will remain an inconsequential context for our lives. Engagement in this will therefore also remain inconsequential. Borgmann provides a metaphor to demonstrate such distant participation by discussing our relationship with pocket calculators. 64 We can find different application, learn its history and master how to use it, but we may never be engaged in the intricacies of computation. Our political context has become a device just like a calculator.

The technological paradigm makes us assume major ideologies that should be according to Borgmann, questioned. As discussed, he challenges, like Berry, our commoditisation of work. Both men also challenge our sense of feminism and its effect on family life and the household. In a pre-technological world, men went out to work and women stayed home. Women led the central social gathering of the family and its needs. The woman’s household was the centre of culture, arts, spirituality and indeed, even happiness. In the 20th century the household changed into a place for commodity access with the housewife’s role reduced to being a manager of consumptions. 65 Today, women have according to Borgmann, “the worst of two worlds”. The role of the woman is weakened as the

64 Ibid p113
65 Ibid p138
“steward” of the pre-technological values and practices, while men continue to be the stewards of technological machinery.

“A housewife who takes a job as a secretary or saleswoman exchanges a position where she can largely organize her own work, has a good amount of free time, is able to acquire and exercise many skills, works for people who she knows intimately and loves well for a position with little skill, no responsibility, and much regimentation.”

This is rather simplistic, as many women have pursued senior careers that require specific, finely honed skills and give them creative opportunity and satisfaction that they as individuals, may not have found if they had chosen a role of being a traditional housewife. However, Borgmann does prompt us to ask what we really mean by feminism in our culture? Do we mix our belief in the right to vote and equal rights to choose, with a veil of pretence of sameness fulfilled by the technological world, leaving us empty of what could be called the sacred feminine?

With the rise of the bourgeoisie in a world divided between private and public distinctions, public celebrations rooted in friendship and religious life, gave way to artistic celebration. In the 19th century this evolved to the construction of buildings such as opera and art houses where the public more and more became a spectator rather than a participant. This loss of public dialogue and shared narrative was not missed by the public as it was balanced by a sense of glamour and prosperity. Today, the public space is primarily a place of shopping.

---

66 Ibid p138
67 Albert Borgmann, Christianity in the Culture of Technology, Power Failure, Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2003, p38
centres and eating establishments aimed at feeding the commodity frenzy. It is generally not a relational space. Furthermore, the age of the World Wide Web has created a quasi-euphoric sense of hyper-intelligence that further accentuates the paradox of our relationships. While we appear to connect with more and more people, in grander and grander ways, we seem to relate to fewer and fewer.

Security and central intelligence are new important safeguards to prevent the implosion of hyper-reality. Within this however, there is the unquestioned sense of not knowing what is real and who we are as persons in relationship with each other and with God. Instead, we appear to be persons in addictive relationships, solely structured through technological devices.

This technological network has replaced the structures of our traditions, our teachers, our leaders and our family. Our allegiances are thin and our commitment shallow. In such a social dynamic our spiritual selves float in a lonely and stormy sea.

5.3 Spirituality of Technology: Relationship with our Self
At the heart of the spiritual life, as has been discussed, is an honest and authentic relationship with our own self. Spiritual leaders of all generations and all traditions have emphasized the importance of clearing one’s calluses caused by the distractions of our material world. The creation of these calluses and the consequent disability that prevents us from looking inwardly is probably technology’s biggest challenge for the spiritual life. Many of us, if push comes to
shove, are ambiguous and perhaps conflicted about the sense of how beneficial technology is to our personal lives. We don’t want to go “backward” technologically, but many of us still do not have a sense of personal happiness and satisfaction as a result of it. The promise of the technological paradigm keeps perpetuating a feeling that life is not good enough and that we need even more - we are almost there but not quite. Consequently, there is a parallel feeling that we ourselves are not good enough. Despite all this, we remain patient with the solutions that we believe are yet to come from that same technological framework, while at the same time being more and more frustrated about our personal roles within that same system. This feeling of impotence, according to Albert Borgmann leads to “complacency that bespeaks a general acceptance of technological society”. ⁶⁸

The currency of “leisure” as has been mentioned is at the forefront of our connection as persons with the technological system and gives us a sense that the system is indeed not closed, but that it is there for us, as persons. But how do we measure this relationship with technology in terms of personal awareness and happiness? Why does it seem to be less effective than we hoped? Borgmann says that we have “divided and decomposed ourselves”. This reduction in substance and dignity of the self has created an emptiness to be filled only by further consumption. There is a major split between our surface appearance as individuals in society, showing off our opulent consumer acquisitions, and the core that underlies our true selves. To a great extent

---

⁶⁸ Ibid p109
technology depicts itself in our lives though our surface exposure of consumption in public and its real effect sticks to us through various manifestations of personal anxiety and dysfunction. Borgmann argues that this line between good and bad has been blurred through technology as it overwhelms the surface sensibility of our lives, to the point that it suffocates our ability to connect with our inner most spirit. Our technical fixes disengage us from the real problems and more importantly, the real potential solutions that can only be found by tapping into our personal core. We live in a world where we are confronted with too much information to discern, too many committees to understand what is genuine and too much consumption to understand what is real.

Wendell Berry points out that technical progress continues to degrade our attitude towards our own physical body as well. In itself the body is not perfect, yet the mechanical standards we create are given an aura of perfection, or at least the capacity to achieve it. We have placed machines as models of our ideal and in doing so we almost desire to be free of the body’s limitations and be more like the machines we have created. The body is just a pleasure machine that we can exploit by utilizing more technology. The consequences do not matter and will somehow take care of themselves.

“They see the body as an encumbrance of the mind, that is, as reduced to a set of mechanical ideas that can be implemented in machines – and so they hate it and long to be free of it.”

---

69 Wendell Berry, The Art of The Common Place, Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2002 p 74
The role of the body has been largely replaced by machines and all has been placed into a type of formula. According to Berry, the role of the human body is slowly becoming perceived as being obsolete!\(^{70}\)

Wendell Berry makes us aware of the tension between the implicit stimuli of technology and a natural loving connection with creation. A pure technological agenda does not focus on the long run let alone on the past. It has caused a separation between production and consumption. In such a world we have slowly lost the knowledge of how to propagate and how to conserve. Berry calls us to care once more, to participate in an economy of affection, sharing the earth will all creatures and accepting the responsibility to use creation well. \(^{71}\)

Technology has a price that is much higher than a financial calculation. Everything is connected and our attempt to control the machinery simply by adding more stop gap measures, is not enough. Again, we must look at the whole and respect our own selves as part of the living whole. We are called to participate in creation with dignity and to look beyond technology to remind ourselves of what it truly means to be human.

### 5.4 Technology and Relationships: Hyper Reality

Our lack of touch with our reality and our own selves has, yet again, led to new technological commodities aimed at making such reality better. A move to hyper-reality, or controlled reality, has developed contrived images of our selves, not only in our advertising and our consumer goods, but more recently in blatant

---

\(^{70}\) Ibid, p140

\(^{71}\) Ibid, p 312
virtual worlds on the web and in electronic games. Disney’s “perfect” world of Disneyland, erotic music videos and instant foods that profess to be something they are not, are but a few examples of how the lines between authenticity and illusion have been blurred. Borgmann points out, that hyper-reality seems to be morally inert. It is indifferent to its context and not fully situated in any world, let alone a true reflection of our personal identity. At its root, hyper-reality is glamorous, disposable and very short term. No matter what, we must eventually return to a reality that can never be as glamorous and this often leads us to a deeper sense of despair and emptiness.

“Commodities, glamorous ones especially, are alluring, but they are not sustaining. A highly interactive hyper-reality may provide you with fitness and co-ordination. Totally disburdening hyper-realities can keep emptiness at bay through even more refined and aggressive stimulation. But since the realm of commodity is not yet total, we must sooner or later step out of it into the real world...it is typically a resentful and defeated return.”

The disconnectedness of hyper-reality doesn’t provide the vigour, the patience and the grace needed, for us to connect with ourselves, situated in the real world. According to Borgmann we must step out of the system to be able to examine the morality of the human condition as a whole: real and hyper-real, inner and exterior. Only then can we ask ourselves what work is life enhancing and illuminating and allow ourselves to accept not only our responsibilities as humans, but ultimately our intimate personal relationship with the Divine.

72 Albert Bormann, Crossing the Postmodern Divide, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993 p94
73 Ibid p96
Technology and hyper-intelligence affect our sense of presence in the world. Technology today is ubiquitous and appears to empower everyone, but at what price? Borgmann and Berry both agree that this has led to a diminished presence of our individual selves in what we do. Our senses are not as present in the minutiae of our actions. Borgmann’s example is that of writing a letter. In the past, we had to take time to compose our thoughts, to think of the correspondent’s situation and then, to put pen to paper. We also had to take the letter to a mailbox, so through these steps, each bit of correspondence was a capsule in a particular time and place. Today’s hyper-reality is quick and much more superficial, according to Borgmann. Our connection is generally limited to eyes and ears. “The symmetry of the world and the body is reduced to a shallow, if glamorous world and a hyper informal, yet disembodied person.” Hyper-intelligence is broadening our abilities in some ways, but it is also creating a culture where we are limiting the time we allocate for intelligent questioning and reflection, to a narrow and often abbreviated font of knowledge. Borgmann reminds us that Thomas Aquinas, reflecting on Aristotle, pointed out in Summa Theologica, that “…human intelligence was intimacy with reality.”

A mechanical reality is slowly choking the more eloquent “natural and traditional” reality of our past. The machinery, as presented within the new device paradigm, aims at subduing the noise of the machines with added distractions and through

74 Ibid p106
75 Albert Borgmann, Crossing the Postmodern Divide, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993 p106
76 Ibid p109
this silence according to Borgmann, we lose further sight of the problems. It subdues our own imperfections and minimizes our sense of the level of resources that these imperfections waste.

Meanwhile our spirituality safeguards a faint voice within, one that eloquently calls for meaning. A voice that is highly personal and open to the transcendent. Our challenge is not to let technology and its obsession with the illusion of a superficial perfection, suffocate that inner voice.

5.5 Spirituality of Technology: The Ability to Pray

Much of what we experience in our lives is counterintuitive when placed in the promise of a safe, efficient and controlled technological reality. The technological paradigm promotes and inflames a craving for supremacy, while at the core of the spiritual life is humility and a trust in a higher power that allows us to accept ourselves as beautiful and wonderful creatures, despite our limitations. Albert Borgmann points out that technology has attempted to remove any sense of “contingency” from our lives. In other words, we are encouraged to believe that we can accomplish just about anything without limit. Technology, Borgmann points out, moved from simply being a tool to deal with necessities and servicing our needs, to filling the space left behind, in our avoidance of contingency. Around the second half of the 20th century we began to commoditise our discomfort with contingency. Instead of prayer and reflection, we sought luxury and pleasure. Since World War II we have experienced a distancing not only from religion and a sense of God, but also from civil authority and political involvement. An illusionary technological promise has taken over from our sense
of what is real and this has led to a strange mix of control and restlessness. Our never-ending hunger has gone from a prayerful life of reverence to a never-ending battle against any sense of contingency. Starting with that very first steam engine, in the early industrial world, we continue to push the limits of our vulnerability, attempting to conquer issues over which we have little control. We have indeed made great strides in healthcare and other forms of creative endeavour, but at the same time, we seem to have sunk deeper into an abyss of denial, terrified of death and angry about human frailty. This conflict, yet again, has been camouflaged by the commodity paradigm, with a superficial sense of victory over this contingency. Instead of prayer, we embark on frivolous consumption. We appear to be frustrated with and almost humiliated by challenges with which we cannot deal. We use technology as an escape triggered by a hope to achieve power over our world and over our boredom. We create a new disorder based on an underlying resentment of the finite nature of our human condition and slowly this disorder is destroying our inner capacity as spiritual beings. The technological life has built within it, features that make salvation a challenge. Salvation may for this purpose, best be defined as obtaining a wholeness of life, including an acceptance and a trust in what we are called to do, comfortable in our humility and dependence.

5.6 Spirituality of Technology: Acts of Love

Albert Borgmann tells us that the moral decay of society is in fact a perfect incubator for technological growth. This reality, where vices are turned into

77 Albert Borgmann, Christianity in the Culture of Technology, Power Failure, Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2003 p89
benefits and something to be exploited, seems to minimise the consequence of
spiritual failures. Greed, envy and gluttony take over from love and become
manifest as the main drivers of the competitive aspect of our action. Any
dialogue about what is right or wrong is mainly left to the political milieu, from
which, as we have discussed, we are detached and in which we place minimal
credibility or accountability. As a result, a morally neutral stance drives the
politics of liberal democracy as it constantly seeks to define the good life. The
age of enlightenment and a sense of liberal discourse in society appear on the
one hand, to liberate us from dogma and the oppression of ruling classes. On
the other hand, Borgmann advises that society is ripe for catastrophe, due to the
fact that we have created a new moral order that encourages autonomous self-
development and self-regulation. Are we able to assess our actions without a
moral barometer? Do the technical modelling and infrastructures that promise us
stability and unlimited growth, provide a sufficient understanding of the
consequences of our actions to insure that they are grounded, first and foremost
in love?

Albert Borgmann suggests that we live with a real possibility of chaos caused by
our actions and that our acts are no longer fuelled by our sense of spiritual
meaning, but by a frenzy of wanting more and more. Borgmann asks whether or
not we are actually posing honest questions about inefficiency, inequality, social
costs, environmental costs, and spiritual costs? How may we bring out the best
of technology by insuring our commodities are created and distributed honestly

78 Albert Borgmann, Technology and the Character of Contemporary Life, A philosophical Inquiry,
Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1984 p148
and lovingly? Borgmann argues that we have neutralized cultural differences and personal giftedness and commoditized our acts to the point of abstraction. He comments that deep social issues like the death penalty, abortion and same sex marriage are discussed, in modular efficient ways. They are not open to deeper reflection and not driven by a moral gauge, but by technological criteria. Trust, charity, relationality, nature, the household, the village and the person, have given way to functional categories such as, return on investment, risk analysis, insurance, and means of production.

Wendell Berry agrees with Borgmann in challenging the forms of analysis and specialized management that we have become so used to and that are instrumental in our decision making. Berry’s position makes us understand that technological efficiency ignores love and reduces everything to an abstraction, measured by numerical equations. He challenges the planners and scientists who look at the world from their lofty positions, trying to find the solutions as to how to bring everything together, while they are in fact, slowly, blindly destroying it. Macro specialists do not see the world with affection. Berry charges such professionals with simply “knowing and not caring”.

“To think better, to think like the best humans, we are probably going to have to learn again to judge a person’s intelligence, not by the ability to recite facts, but by the good or harmoniousness of his or her surroundings. We must suspect that any statistical justification of ugliness and violence is a revelation of stupidity.”

79 Wendell Berry, The Art of The Common Place, Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2002  p 193
Technology, which helps gather and store knowledge, is the weapon and the tool of these experts. It is also the desensitizer. It gives a sense of control and alienates those who are seeking knowledge through facts and figures, from the real priorities of living. In such an instrumental world the technology is not connected or situated in a particular place and can therefore not understand, through feeling, what is really at stake? There is no valid testing of the tools and no sense of consequence. The means are more important than the ends and specialization leads to a dominance of machine over people and their natural world.

As spiritual beings, love must be our cornerstone. Ultimately, love prepares us to confront death and helps us conquer it, while a world of efficiency and numbers is defeated by death. Berry calls us to temper our scientific and technological drive with sympathetic thinking, as opposed to simply rational analysis. We need to have a sense of inclusiveness and loyalty that is outside the technological basic assumption of limitless growth. We need to seek wisdom that is appropriate to our desire to bear witness to our human potential, as opposed to trying to conquer the world through progress.

Technology can destroy relationships and can propagate an antipathy towards community life and in turn, to communal moral standards. Our motivations must be informed not only by knowledge, but by feelings. Our affection and sense of responsibility will help us evaluate our wants and can help us respond to the oppression within which we live. A loving stance helps us get rooted. While technology and progress present us with a series of problems, love can take us
beyond the facts and figures. It can lead us back to harmony, a harmony between our works, our pleasures, our wants and our needs. Such a harmony is needed for a moral existence. Such a world is not about technology for the sake of it, but about good order and balance. It is a world with a longer memory, multidimensional, and one that is not focused on a temporary agenda, but that has a long-term vision. Such a world is not to be justified by economics or science, but by humanities and by love. If left unto itself “industrialization always proposes to correct its errors by more industrialization”. Instead, we must look into our hearts, into our prayers and into our sense of goodness. We must rediscover a world where technology is a tool and not an end unto itself. It may be a functional aid on our journeys, but not the central navigator. Ultimately, we must ask ourselves a central question: is technology being used in a life affirming way?

5.7 The Spirituality of Technology: Work

Our work is a result of our call to be co-creators of the universe and when we look at our labour with a spiritual lens, it is seen as holy, prayerful and enriching in ways beyond the actual product we create. Today, technology has removed much of the sense of our direct relationship with that work. We have a view that the advanced technology is the main source of grace and more important than the applied work itself. The tool and its use have become the achievement. Despite our sense of openness and liberty, it is a small elite of corporate developers that actually determine the direction of the technological

---

80 Ibid, p 207
81 Ibid, p 241
advancements and the product that we now consider to be at the core of human creativity. Borgmann suggests that for the most part our technological work is mundane and that we live in a society where creativity is being neutralized and homogenized.\textsuperscript{82} He points out that both in capitalism and communism, technology contributes to worker degradation. The “progress promise” of technology is preached not just by the technological elite, but by “preachers, moralists and educators”.\textsuperscript{83} Workers too, became compliant with the technological paradigm and according to Borgmann, this has unknowingly led to a growing resentment toward work. Meanwhile, machines are seen by industrialists to be much less of a burden on the economic model and therefore preferable to actual workers and their disgruntlement. Our work becomes more and more ambiguous, defined as “doing” rather than “making” and guided by technological maximum efficiency rather than moral values, often without much time for ethical discernment or genuine pride in what we make and how we make it. Borgmann has pointed out that both the work and the product itself, seriously affect the spiritual fabric of society. We do not work on a “neutral” stage. The product itself is an ethical decision and greatly affects our spiritual setting, yet we are often withdrawn and alienated from it, relegating our natural drive for creativity to the limited time left for leisure.\textsuperscript{84} We have split our public actions from our innermost feelings.

\textsuperscript{82} Albert Borgmann, \textit{Technology and the Character of Contemporary Life, A philosophical Inquiry}, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1984 p20
\textsuperscript{83} Ibid p121
\textsuperscript{84} Albert Bormann, \textit{Crossing the Postmodern Divide}, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993 p114
Chapter 6
Reflections on Borgmann and Berry

Wendell Berry and Albert Borgmann have many areas of overlapping agreement when assessing the effects of technology on our values and our world view.

Berry tends to look at specific localized behaviour, like agricultural equipment, computers etcetera, while Borgmann looks at a more philosophical and systematic approach through his device paradigm. There is much we can learn about our behaviour by reflecting as Berry does, on the specific ramifications of technological obsession on our personal lives and on our societies. We can also understand like Borgmann, that we need to engage in the development and evolution of social structures and not disregard the reality of the global, industrial model in which we live. Wendell Berry makes us rethink virtues in the context of a modern technological world. What does it mean to be loyal, to be affectionate and modest? What does it mean to be in good relationship, particularly in family, and to be an authentic citizen in society? He presents us with a new ethic and a clarification of what it means to be a human being in relation to God. Albert Borgmann, a philosopher and cultural critic, helps us build on what we learn from Berry and encourages us to apply our analysis of technology at a more profound level. He points out that technology is short sighted and unenlightened, but he is somewhat more optimistic about the possibilities of an industrialized world. “Part
of this optimism is the belief that technology, coming to the end of its rope, will have to turn to Christianity for guidance if it is to avoid self-destruction.\textsuperscript{85}

Both authors tell us that we must pull away from the hold of the technological milieu, so that we may reclaim what is true and holy at the core of being human. Berry’s assertive and determined approach perhaps begets his frustration, resignation and maybe a touch of anger. Nevertheless, in his extreme approach, he shows us how difficult it is to actually pull away from the pervasive nature of technology. However, once he frees himself from the addiction, Berry does not sufficiently re-engage, nor does he provide us the tools to do so. Borgmann’s understanding of the device paradigm can help us understand exactly what our task is. It can help us understand the complexity of the technological world by conquering its most challenging attributes – its ability to camouflage itself and to feed off of the liberal capitalist system in which it flourishes.

6.1 A New Theology of Technology

A new theology of technology is necessary, one that helps us go through the vortex of technological blindness and that challenges us to consider ways of understanding God and Christ active in the world, beyond the medieval metaphors. Technology is all about efficiency, speed and growth. Wendell Berry points out that nature is all about being in the present, drawing from the past, without mortgaging the future and that, good work takes time. Good work is a “cosmic intention” which assumes the essential wisdom of communities over

\textsuperscript{85} Albert Borgmann, \textit{Christianity in the Culture of Technology, Power Failure}, Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2003, p 83
generations. Berry asks us to look beyond the ease of technology and regain our depth. We must seek to redeem the society that is dominated by gluttony and a competitive environment made up of winners and losers obsessed with profits at any cost. This is a society that has turned against the potential of our human nature. It has abandoned honesty, compassion and mutuality. Such a society needs to be redeemed.

James Olthuis tells us that all worldviews ‘if they are to remain viable, need to be changed continually as faith deepens, as insight into reality grows, and as individuals and cultures move on to new stages in their development.’ Worldviews shape our experience, and experience must shape our worldviews. We must open ourselves up to understand ourselves better as humans, as good humans, in a technological era. We need to test and refine our worldview and not blindly fear our own progress. However, we must challenge what our worldview towards technology is and ask, over and over again, whether or not we remain in touch with what we hold sacred, and can find ways of insuring that such technology is life affirming.

We can regain a more intrinsic sense of pleasure by redefining our roles in the universe as children of God, aimed at contributing through our vocations. We must work to become more integrated, rather than alienated and place value in


local versus global, quality versus quantity, land versus money. Thus we will be able to examine the core of our being and the spirituality that connects us with our very centres. In that creation, we will find real pleasure.

“This bountiful and lovely thought that all creatures are pleasing to God- and potentially pleasing, therefore, to us- is unthinkable from the point of view of an economy divorced from pleasure, such as the one we have now, which completely discounts the capacity of people to be affectionate toward what they do and what they us and where they live and the other people and creatures with whom they live.”

Nature can be our teacher, our judge and our window to God and redemption. We can apply our Christian Gospel priorities to the technological steamroller. We can bring new insight into how we define nature, freedom, relationship and subjective wants, all of which have been hijacked to be used sinfully in our application of technology. We can do so by respectfully reconnecting with nature, which in turn, will allow us to humbly reconnect with our humanity. We will again learn to love creation. Technology as applied to endless expansion is causing us to destroy the earth. In doing so, technology is acting as a catalyst in an act of blasphemy. We are treating the word of God, as seen through His or Her creation, in a blasphemous way. We have to learn and know our limits as to what is appropriate. Wendell Berry presents us with an ecological imagination that connects us to the whole system and yet, is profoundly personal. Albert Borgmann is a realist and accepts that technology is not going away. We understand how the system that technology has developed around itself, is denying us the awareness and ability to go back and evaluate the root reasons.

88 Ibid, p 215
89 Ibid, p 240
for machinery. We have a responsibility to not leave it to be propelled primarily by unmitigated greed. Borgmann, like Berry, encourages us to open ourselves to the Spirit and grace of our efforts. Part of this grace, he urges, will help us to embrace the technological challenges head on. He argues that we cannot find this graced fortitude in a “cocoon of self-indulgence”.90 One might reasonably bring this challenge to Wendell Berry, who seems to have dismissed the possibility of redeeming technology. Just as we cannot judge grace through technological standards, Borgmann challenges us to not assume that technology is devoid of grace.91 At the moment we can perceive ourselves as a form of negotiated commodity in a culture where the notion of salvation seems to be anathema in our individual contracts with the world. We must re-engage as full human beings. We must challenge the superficiality and romantic solutions that we apply to the technological issues and delve deeply into the core of our actions. This will show us the root propensity for sin and indeed, the root manifestation of grace.92

6.2 A Call to Engage

The machine is a symbol of both the potential and the weakness of humanity. We have discussed how by looking at only the surface attributes of the production system, we are only superficially understanding both ends of that spectrum. We see how technology has brought much opportunity and

---

90 Albert Borgmann, *Christianity in the Culture of Technology, Power Failure*, Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2003 p 179

91 Ibid p 80

92 Ibid p 88
knowledge to many more people than in a pre-technological world. We also see how opportunity gives way to opportunism and power in the hands of a few. Most in our society are not in a place of happiness, but are, as Borgmann puts it, lost in “distracting and debilitating affluence”.

Motivation that is limited to individual aspirations leads to ultimate decay and indifference. The technological model, like capitalism, does not have the ability to self-modulate. That function is in the hands of persons of good will, relating, reflecting and praying. A tradition that seeks goodness cannot be invoked by law or a policing authority, but by an open heart and an engaged spirit. In many ways communication technology has given us the opportunity to be more connected and open in our dialogue. However, inherent in it is a culture of economic growth driven by unending consumerism. At the same time, the superficiality of the device paradigm acts as an anaesthetic against the fundamental challenges and injustice. Ultimately, as we have discussed, liberal democracy and technology are intimately tied to each other, mutually supportive to a level of quasi-idolatry. Recently, we have seen how the urban occupation movements by social justice demonstrators collaborated in substantial group dynamics with the help of technology and social media. At the same time, it was that same technology that kept such movements in check that swayed public opinion and measured society’s patience through media reports, and ultimately secured the core of the urban machinery in the name of economic stability and progress. The technological machine was at the source of many of the injustices which were

93 Ibid p95
94 Ibid p95
being protested. They were also what connected the protestors, and in turn, controlled the security of the city on behalf of the status quo. It is difficult to engage in such a dance. What is at the heart of what is right? It is clear that we must rethink the definitions of both justice and goodness with that awareness, as well as our own enactment of spirituality in that mix.

While Berry, a Protestant, seems to retract from technology and modern society, having decided that there is no good in it as it withdraws us from our land, ourselves and our God, Borgmann takes a more Catholic point of view and invites us to engage. Like Pope John Paul II who, in his encyclical *The Rapid Development, To Those Responsible for Communication* acknowledged the value of technology and invited all to participate in its redemption as its co-creators, 95 Borgmann also recognises that technology is a human creation and therefore it is up to humans to use it for the good, and to balance things when it is not. He points out that it is through culture and the negotiation of relationships that we give ourselves meaning. Likewise, we cannot just look at the effects of machinery on infrastructure and social systems in an isolated way, but within our culture and in relationship with ourselves. For Borgmann, part of being a spiritual being, is to be forgiving and to help imbue grace in places where there is tension. He urges us not to be complacent about technology. He says that it may be inelegant and messy, but an evolving sense of authorship in technology

rather than a distant impersonal and merely functional link, will inevitably bring some of our spirit back to the heart of our work. Left to its own, technology will not, according to Borgmann, self-destruct. It will continue to deflect its critique and remain totally void of a moral compass. We must separate the self-perpetuating power of technology from the equally morally neutral agenda of liberal democracy. We must intimately engage with the components of technology and diffuse the device paradigm to make better judgements of our production process and assess how it can be mobilized towards a holier future.

Borgmann invites us to remove ourselves from a purely judgemental and moralistic critique of technology and to examine how we feel. We must, he says, reform both our philosophy and our methodology. This should not be a philosophy about or within technology, but spirituality for technology. To reform technology we need to be true to what we feel and what is challenged at the heart of our world view. We must ignore the seductive promise of technology and look within it with a holy mandate and openness to reform. In this way we can learn to distance ourselves from technology’s addictive qualities while pushing to do something genuine and positive. We engage technology not just because something is possible, but to embrace gifts of creativity now available to us - gifts that upon inner reflection we feel are constructive in our human journey.

---

6.3 Tactics

How do we look at our responsibility for technology without merely deeming it to be toil? Can we have control over technology? How do we engage, negotiate and determine our action when the pattern of behaviour, the goals and the parameters are largely discussed through technological categories? Borgmann suggests that we should not, as Berry did, withdraw from our technological environment. Instead, the parameters of engagement versus distraction must be at the forefront of our minds. We can thus be aware that we are blessed with the capacity to infuse goodness in that same technological world. 98 Borgmann understands that we may not succeed in finding an alternative social norm to publicly promote as a new reality, and that the technological paradigm of devices is overwhelmingly today’s acceptable standard. Despite its shortcomings technology is not seen by society as a force of power which we created and that we can change, but as something that implicitly and intrinsically defines our world perspective. Borgmann suggests that every time a “thing” becomes a “commodity” an “engagement” becomes a “diversion” and a decision is being made to strengthen the pattern of technology and our further disappearance within it. However, this accepted norm can be mitigated, and that is our responsibility.

The choice to take on technology and help revive its Godly beauty will be difficult for many reasons. We will be confronted by familiar, seductive promises: glamour, the further ease of burden, the guarantee to provide ourselves and our

98 Ibid p104
children with finer things, reaffirmation of our existence through material goods and ultimately, happiness.  

This can be balanced by listening to our hearts and reflecting on the sense of loss and sadness, the feeling of betrayal of our tradition and the joy of being true to our real potential as partners in creation.. Borgmann tells us that this feeling of compliance in the technologic agenda and our desire to remedy can be seen as the voice within, which is to be nurtured.

Unlike Berry, Borgmann does not recommend embargos on technological development, even if that could happen. He suggests an alternative which he calls a dose of postmodern realism with communal celebration. This is a spirituality that is both eloquent and real. Borgmann argues that postmodern spirituality has tended to diffuse realism while suggesting that nothing outside the spiritual realm exists. He criticizes postmodern spirituality for having rejected ethnocentrism and logo centrism, while not realizing that ethnocentrism shapes core spiritual thinking. Borgmann attempts to explain through the following analogy. A book, on its own is meaningless without, what Borgmann calls, an “eloquent reality”. A book receives meaning from its environment. Borgmann argues that, without real life consequences we end up with yet another version of hyper-reality. Hyper-reality according to the author, is taking over spiritual eloquence. However, there is hope. This drowning of spirituality has not yet happened in totality and there still is according to Brogmann, a way for us to enter into the formative process of a new balanced reality through an engaged

---

99 Ibid p105
100 Albert Bormann, Crossing the Postmodern Divide, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993 p117
spirituality. Borgmann does not call for destroying the system or reversing technology. In fact, he feels that some of technology’s indispensability is “no misfortune”. The pre-technological world he points out was not without problems. Small towns for instance, were rampant with superstition, oppression and disease. The aim, Borgmann posits, is not to merely challenge the technological mindset that feels it is supreme to everything before. He urges us instead, to infuse a relational spirituality into technological thought - to provide checks and balances and a sense of personal responsibility that is deeper than merely a passing response to its symptoms.

We must always ask how we are able to use the power of technology on behalf of the good. We must always challenge the actual device paradigm itself, as it has a momentum that we cannot change while we rest complacently within it. Internal reform, according to Borgmann, has not worked. More importantly, it is slowly eating away at the spiritual flame within us. As we have seen, the device paradigm is not conducive to many of the qualities of our lives that nurture spirituality. We must embark on an engaged spirituality aimed at diffusing the shell of the paradigm from a new vantage point – a spiritual one. This will allow us to deal with the heart of technological matters more honestly and more lovingly. Technology has transformative power on the very nature of what a society is. Spirituality has transformative power on technology.

6.4 Focal Realities

Albert Borgmann believes that society can be a source of healing, not through social policy and empirical data but through less measurable forms of social
discourse and engagement. Borgmann suggests that these focal points, or “focal realities”, help reaffirm our presence as persons and make us more aware of our contingency. He does not prescribe them, but asks that we recall them within ourselves. He starts by looking at the wilderness which shows no trace of technology and which can help us recall the roots of our open, social presence. Like Wendell Berry, Borgmann presents nature as the ultimate earthly model of wisdom and authenticity. Nature does not lose its attributes when it is lovingly modified by humans. Animals and plants are indeed often changed based on the human experience, but can at the same time remain in tune with their natural roots. This natural hierarchy is not according to Borgmann, just about elegance or perfection, but totally about “doing” and about human change and experiment within a moral order. “Things can be focal only in the care of human practices … focal reality is alive in the symmetry of things and practices of nature, craft and art entrusted to the care of humans”. 101

In his book, Power Failure, Borgmann wonders how we have gone beyond the natural hierarchy and managed to conceal the moral order. He looks closely at public life and particularly public celebrations as being at the centre of the nature of human community. Borgmann points out that community goes beyond a shared interest, but is a community of “memory and practical commitment” 102 He encourages celebrations focussed on something real and not merely a symbolic gesture. Such celebrations he argues, when replaced by technology,

101 Ibid p121  
102 Albert Bormann, Crossing the Postmodern Divide, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993 p 47
lose their fundamental importance as they lose their connection with reality. Instead, Borgmann calls for real focal points of celebration where participants are engaged and where technology is not in control. Society, says Borgmann, has a responsibility on behalf of the public to provide comfortable communal spaces for these focal gatherings. Included of course, are religious celebrations that provide a reflection of the people’s need to worship publicly. “Religion needs the inspiration of focal and real celebration.” 103 He again argues that we must reshape the split between public and private, labour and leisure production and consumption. We must encourage communal dialogue and public conversation that can embody a public spirituality made up of people rooted in their conventions. Technological society has relegated focal points to a private domain, usually within the family.

A technological society has created an individualistic, homogenous and ever changing forum where distinct, intimate and deeply communal celebrations and rituals are at best inhibited, and often simply relegated to being a form of old fashioned quaintness. Instead they are held onto in the privacy of one’s home with little support from the dynamics of society at large. Borgmann states that we must break this wall or our children won’t know what to do when they leave the family. 104 Our celebrations need to be shared as a sign that we are generous of spirit.

103 Albert Borgmann, Christianity in the Culture of Technology, Power Failure, Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2003

104 Ibid. p61
6.5 God in All Things

A spiritual predisposition implicitly calls that we engage with technology in a loving manner and that within it we see a manifestation of God. Can God be found in technology? Can we see within technology God’s care, love and beauty despite the imperfections? Technology is about control and predictability, while a relationship with God is about an acceptance of contingency. Borgmann tells us that to see this in technology, “less direction and more reflection is called for”.105

In such a world of methodological equations, what has happened to transcendence, to our sense of mystery and to our understanding of our origins and cosmic destiny? Wendell Berry calls us to appropriate creation with deference and humility, aware of the mystery and the majesty of God’s presence.106 Our existence must be understood as relational with each other, with ourselves and with God. We are not merely functional elements, but part of a broader mysterious creation in progress. Religion has indeed at times been a co-conspirator with science and technology, encouraging a conceptual duality between this world and the next. Berry calls instead for a unity of affection, thought and body. The reality is that we are part of a mysterious whole.

“One’s love gradually responds to the place as it really is, and one’s visions gradually image possibilities that are really in it …what one wants can become the same as what one has, and one’s knowledge can cause respect for what one knows.” 107

105 Ibid p65
107 Ibid  p187
Berry invites us to think with affection, as opposed to thinking in the abstract. We must not look at each other as statistical reference points, but persons with names. The industrialized "accounting" approach as seen in all aspects of modern life diminishes our understanding of sexuality, art, romance, and love. It diminishes the integrity of what we do as humans. Our innovations should not be based on a technology that further draws us away from our communities, our families and ultimately God.

Theology is not scientific. God is not an idea. There must be a love and affection for God’s mystery, in order to do the right thinking. We must not look at each other and at God as objects. We must redefine the basic standards and reconcile them with our sense of mystery as creatures of God.

When we feel we are losing in a technological race, we find our lives and our souls lost in a sense of abstract wildness. But, we can return to the incarnate spirituality that is at the core of our Christian theology and with reflection, connection and affection, we can also regain responsibility. Our lives can then once again, be seen as being part of a larger history and death as a mysterious and natural part of that history. There is a sense of order to it all. We just have to discover it and understand that we don’t control the order.
Chapter 7
Some Additional Perspectives

In this chapter we look at several questions that remain unanswered and some attributes of technology that may need attention beyond that of Borgmann and Berry. The criticism of technology by Wendell Berry, echoed in a different language by Albert Borgmann, calls us to a spiritual engagement that is honest, open and always evolving. We will look more closely at the challenge of Christianity in reading the sign of the times. We will consider the challenge posed by the rapid rate of change that technology presents and technology’s affinity to the system.

7.1 New Technology and Spirituality: Reading the Sign Of the Times

Christian spirituality has struggled throughout history, with its ability to adapt and read the sign of the times. If that’s not done, the Christian community is missing its call to be leaven in the bread and risks becoming obsolete. St. Paul pushed the early apostles to look beyond the Jewish community in Jerusalem. He went out to the world at large, communicated extensively and applied the tools available in the culture that he encountered, to spread the Good News he was teaching. The Protestant reformation, despite the pain and tensions, led to an evolving church that reformed and adapted to the world in which it found itself, as did the Second Vatican council in its call to be a church inside society and not outside of it. How are we to “teach all nations” if we do not allow ourselves to
grow outside of the parochial box? We must be in solidarity with both the oppressed and the oppressor and offer hope and prayer to understand the limited condition as well as the transformative potential of being a human. It cannot be right for us to withdraw from the interconnected world in which we live and focus only on the needs of our immediate local world. As Christians it continues to be our responsibility to use our human gifts carefully, to fight against our weaknesses and indeed to channel our energies for goodness and true salvation. To do so, Christianity must be engaged.

We must have the courage to live to our potential and to contribute to the ongoing process of creation. We must celebrate our work, our discoveries, and our achievements. At the same time we must accept our limitations and always look at our realities as a whole. This balance is the challenge of our redemption, but we must rise to that challenge. We can be engaged in a reality of change and transformation, while praying to be in touch with our true vocations and be rooted in a communal existence.

We must have the courage and commitment over and over again to take ourselves outside a technological prison, while understanding that those elements that make up that prison can be conduits for grace. One need only list the hundreds of examples, manifestations of love, justice and hope, which have been a direct result of good people using technology as a tool for goodness. Berry is right that healthcare has become obsessed with life longevity and surgical success while losing sight of holistic health. However, science has also saved millions of lives in developing nations, reduced pain caused by disease
and contributed to nourishment and hygiene. Flawed and corruptible? Absolutely. Full of potential in good hands? I would say so. Berry is right that telecommunications has not educated a people. However the ability for groups to congregate through computer technology, as seen recently in the grass roots movement that elected US president Obama and the movements that brought down oppressive governments in the Middle East, cannot be denied. Mostly superficial, as depicted in Borgmann’s paradigm? Perhaps. However, the internet is arguably full of positive potential in good hands. Can we possibly evolve sufficiently and go beyond the net’s technological impersonal nature and balance that with the presence of our words and the beauty of our creative being? Can we rise beyond these limitations and use the net to fulfill broad and loving social dialogue and perhaps engage, or at least facilitate more focal points that Borgmann suggests are so important to our communities?

Borgmann explains that in our lived spirituality we are surely not called to run away from our sinfulness by withdrawing from our lives. Is this not the risk that Wendell Berry takes when he refuses to look at the potential of a computer or industrialization? However, perhaps Borgmann too must go further and not only engage with technology to mitigate it, but to embrace and discover even more of its potential, both spiritual and human. An exploration in how we take a more proactive stance can be the subject of another paper.

7.2 A Race Against Time

One challenge that neither Borgmann nor Berry have confronted is the incredibly fast rate of change that technology presents. Technology, in its
affinity with our system of liberal democracy is pervasive in all our lives and kindles innate urges for control, power and gluttony. At the best of times we are challenged to constantly mitigate the temptation to act as if we are God and to seek the humility and sincerity of a spiritual predisposition. To do so we must constantly be assessing our lives in dialogue with technology. We must analyze and delve more deeply into the moral fabric of our action, our relationships and our values as these respond to new technological output.

In the past, whenever major shifts in human engagement occurred, great thinkers evolved and their thoughts were debated, applied and tested through the course of time. Doctors of the church, moral philosophers and spiritual leaders reflected for decades on the world’s dynamic shifts and presented guiding teachings that helped us find our place in the new world with a sense of moral and spiritual grounding. At first, such thinkers were often considered heretics, but over time many were seen as enlightened sources of inspiration and on whose prophetic work one could build long term guides to human moral behaviour. These include such profound individuals as Aristotle, Thomas Aquinas and more recently, Thomas Merton. At other times Christian synods and councils were held to stimulate similar reflection, often with decades if not centuries separating their establishment. Their goal was to help unpack changes in the world and to meticulously provide codes of human behaviour that best reflect the current moral reality. Secular society also had a system of bills of rights and constitutions that changed slowly, as a response to the historical context.
Today however, the rate of technological change is shifting social norms faster than any time in history. In the last decade alone we have seen revolutionary changes in communication devices, storytelling platforms and citizen engagement. A philosopher from the turn of the millennium who has not been immersed in digital technology would undoubtedly be unable to provide sufficient insight in today’s world, or even be able to ask the right questions. It is fair to point out that fundamental truths stand beyond the test of time. However, we could argue that to be engaged in an ethical discernment process with technology, we must be doing so in a way that is as transitional as the technology itself. We must seek new, nimble and current intellectual and moral engagement that is easy to understand, interpret and further reform, engaging a broad community of thinking and debate. Perhaps we can use the technology itself through social media and self-published work, as was previously suggested. Perhaps we need to rely less on absolutes or philosophical theory and more on the lived ethics of our spiritual engagement.
Chapter 8

Conclusion

We have argued that spirituality is at its fullest if it is a lived spirituality. Technology is a language that permeates our everyday existence, our actions and our sense of being. Therefore, for us to help insure that our lives contribute to the goodness of creation, we must endeavour to infuse our spirituality into our technological world. Technology does exist, and like all human endeavours it can be used for good or for evil. I agree with Albert Borgmann as he challenges us to break through the superficial shell of technology and in doing so we can both harness it and develop limits. We must introduce new questions, shed new light, and reorient ourselves at every turn of the technological road. This dialogue can shed new light on our understanding of our human frailties and on our obsession with being God and having omnipotent power. Christianity at its heart should inform us in doing so. Wendell Berry, like fundamental Christianity, is threatened and rejects both modernity and technology. However, escaping from technology is to fall prey to it. Technology should and could be used to support our lives while not being its centre.

Borgmann describes modern progress and technological obsession as our era’s version of blinding wealth:

“It is the accomplishment of unquestionable comfort and security that has all but paralyzed our capacity to help and to be helped and so to have part in the fullness of life. Advanced poverty, one might say, is a radically
aggravated and universalized form of the condition of the rich of which the Bible speaks. ¹⁰⁸

The Gospel tells us that it is hard for one who is wealthy to enter The Kingdom of Heaven. However, it isn’t impossible. Borgmann points out that technology with its focus on power and dominion, must instead, be reoriented towards an agenda of helping others. Technology like wealth, left unto itself, encourages a sense of individualism and greed. Christianity must understand this propensity towards an impoverishment of life and attend to balance, inform and transform.

Wendell Berry helps us understand that technological progress has become a modern idol. However, we must remember that technology is not an abstract term and does not exist on its own unless we let it thrive and run freely, unless we choose to worship and revere such an idol. We have created it, but we are not helpless. We are not victims. We are both part of the problem and part of the solution. Consequently, it is in that conflict and challenge that we may find the answers to many of our spiritual yearnings.

¹⁰⁸ Albert Borgmann, Christianity in the Culture of Technology, Power Failure, Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2003 p106
Bibliography


