

Technology: A Threat to the Human Soul?

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New York Magazine

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Author of *The Tech-wise Family*

November 2017

PETER WEHNER: Everybody, thank you for being here this morning. I wanted to introduce this session, which I'm really excited about.

In terms of this session, this was the Andrew Faith Angle Forum -- from Andrew Steer to Andrew Sullivan to Andy Crouch. So for this session we have the Andrew and Andy Show. And I'm thrilled that they're here.

The subject is "Technology: War on the Human Soul". You know the biographies by now. By now you know hopefully all Andrew and Andy. Andrew's an award-winning editor and author and blogger. He writes weekly for the *New York Magazine* -- terrific essays -- and is one of the most influential writers of the last several decades.

Andy Crouch is author of *Tech-Wise Family* and writes about culture and Christian faith and is one of the most provocative and interesting thinkers around. Conversations with Andy, and reading him, always help me and people that I know to think better and more wisely.

I invited them to do this session because they have both written on a topic that is I think an important one: Is technology a threat to the human soul? And of course, the presupposition here is that there is a human soul and that understanding the threat of technology and the concerns that theology or an attitude, a spiritual attitude, can help us to understand what exactly these threats are, as well as the gifts that they are.

Andrew, you all may have read this I hope, but if not, he wrote a piece for the *New York* called "I Used to be a Human Being". I can actually testify that he is *still* a human being and, even when he was blogging, he was a human being. But he's different because of the journey that he's gone through and I wanted him to explore that and some of the deeper implications.

Andy has written, among other things, *The Tech-Wise Family*, which is a terrific book. It's practically helpful but it's also beautifully written. It deals with some of the deeper aspects of these questions.

So what we're going to do is we'll start with Andrew. He'll go for about 20 minutes. Then we'll have Andy. He'll go about 20 minutes.

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And it'll be the same drill, which is if you have questions, just get my attention and I will call on you and then we'll have the break and then we'll finish up. So, thank you both for being here. And Andrew, the floor is yours.

ANDREW SULLIVAN: Thank you. I'm going to ask everybody to shut their laptops, please. See if you can. And also, to turn off all phones and put them away.

This is not for leaking. It's just for something called attention, which is something that human beings used to exercise in the West and no longer do.

My own story is kind of familiar, I'm sure, to many of you. But to sum it up, basically, you know, I love the Internet and jumped into it probably sooner than most people.

Found the capacity of blogging and information just intoxicating and the ability to constantly have the world at your fingertips, know whatever's going on at that particular moment and developed very early a blog that went on for 15 years and, over those 15 years, grew more and more intense, until, by the end of it, I was basically barely living at all.

I think one of the great mistakes people make is thinking, as I did for a while, that being online constantly and on your phone constantly is simply an addition to what you're already doing. It's a wonderful enhancement of what you're doing. And it's what's not to like.

But I think over time, you realize that in fact it's not. It really is either/or. You're either present or you're in that world, in this world of constant distraction and news and ideas and a world that is not actually happening around you or even with people you connect with. And that is not something you can add onto your life. It's something that replaces your life.

I realized that the eight or nine hours a day I was spending online, I wasn't spending with my friends. I wasn't spending with my husband. I wasn't spending actually reading anything. I was absorbing information, which is a very different thing than actually acquiring any sort of knowledge because it also becomes incredibly difficult to retain.

I bet you if I ask you what were you reading online two days ago, you would have absolutely no idea what it was. But it was incredibly so important at that moment that you had to absorb it rather than actually live at all at that particular moment. And I think those of us that are in journalism are particularly caught up in this. And it has a real impact on one's general state of being.

Eventually, after 15 years, I really was -- because I think I had been doing it for longer than most people and had begun to do it more intensely than most people, and also, because when you're in that space, if you're an actor in that space, you're also actually handling every day and every minute the stress, especially in this culture, of being in public all the time, so that the entire notion of public and private begins to evaporate.

There is no privacy left, which is of course one of the solvents of liberalism, which is that the

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private/public distinction is kind of crucial to the possibility of a liberal order. And we have absolutely eviscerated that possibility. So everything is now public and privacy doesn't really mean anything at all. There is no place to go. Increasingly there is no home to return to.

So I gave up. I just checked out and went on a meditation retreat. I spent a year doing nothing except reading books and really weaning myself off any online communication except for, you know, obvious email every morning and logistics, meeting people, et cetera, et cetera.

But to a great extent, I tried to get myself off it completely and then went into a 10-day meditation retreat for personal meditation, which was revelatory to me because it's pretty hardcore.

Get up at 5:30 in the morning and, until 7:30 at night, you are constantly seated with your eyes closed or in sections of an hour each, or you're doing walking meditation or you're having meals in which you're not even allowed to look at each other in the eye and in which the whole world is slowed down so that you actually feel what it is to actually live just as a being, as a human being. In other words, you stop doing and you start being.

And it's terrifying, of course. There's nothing to do. You're not even allowed to read on this retreat. And I was around some pretty intense people. I was there for 10 days. About 45 people were there for three months in complete silence and another 45 people were in there for six weeks.

And the immediate impact was relief. It's a liberation. I don't have to be there. Not only that, but I had to deliver up my iPhone in this extraordinary ceremony of renunciation. It was kind of a religious moment where you give over the idol and you return to silence and to yourself. But over time, of course, what happens is you begin to settle into who you really are. You begin to actually get some perspective on your own life and being, until usually, and I was only told afterwards this is quite normal. At the time, I was kind of terrified.

I was walking one day through the woods around the meditation center and broke down. And there was something about the woodlands that reminded me of my childhood where I grew up in rural Sussex. And I had not an easy childhood. My mother was bipolar and was constantly in and out of mental hospitals. And she was being bipolar without any particular boundaries. So as a kid, I absorbed a lot of the pain that she was going through. And I've subsequently handled that through therapy and whatever. But suddenly, boom, I was absolutely back there. I was seven years old. All the pain that she had expressed and that I had absorbed suddenly began coursing through my brain and my mind and my body all over again, more vividly than it had happened at any time since my childhood. It was quite terrifying.

Not only that, but you're so alone and you can't even speak and talk or be with anybody. You have nobody to share this with. And it took two or three days for this, what I called in my head, because I was trying to sort of put words around it because words are how I understand the world. And I just came up with the phrase extreme suffering to describe what I was going through. It did eventually lift after two or three days. And after those two or three days, I began to have just a little bit more sense of distance from it, more than I'd had in quite a while.

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What occurred to me was why was this happening and why did it take three days of silence to suddenly relive that. And the answer is I think that so much of what we do in the modern West, especially when it comes to this kind of communication, is a form of distraction. I had suddenly stumbled across the thing I most wanted to distract myself from.

Remove these distractions, remove this constant search for some other kind of attention, which is equally available -- always available to you. Banish at any time the sense of being alone, which is what this thing promises you. You will never be alone. There's always someone on the other line communicating, venting that you can relate to. You're never alone.

And so, it strikes me as the latest ratchet in Western civilization's successful campaign to change individual human beings from people who are to people who do and to essentially separate us from a very core aspect of what it is to be human insofar as it has been the case for human beings for the just overwhelming majority of our time on Planet Earth.

This is very new. This is probably 300 years old, I mean, in terms of the economy of distraction, the cult of productivity, the cult of efficiency. Compare to, well, 195,000 years of being hunter-gatherer and reading nothing at all and only 6,000 years of a more developed civilization. But still, those civilizations tapped into what it was to be human. You were able to be with other people constantly. In fact, our actual nature is to be with one another. We're a social animal. This thing prevents that.

Again, it's an absolute delusion to think you're with anybody when you're looking at this. You're not. You're gone. You're in another place. And it's a much more abstract place. It's not in any way where a body exists. It's just where this addled part of your mind really exists.

You're not involved in making anything with your hands. You're not involved in constructing a relationship with another people, whether it be friendship or family or spouse or boyfriend and girlfriend. And you live more and more inside your head.

And inside your head, there is almost nothing but noise. If you think of this as an analogy to silence and noise, what we do every day from the minute we look at this thing is to fill our mind with noise, with words, with things happening, with videos, with text, with interpretation of stuff which is purely -- it banishes -- I mean, even those moments in our lives when we're waiting for Starbucks, you know, in a line or we're at the airport. We can no longer tolerate more than 30 seconds of silence or solitude. This thing is our constant companion.

It's very new. It's only about 10 years old. But it has completely tapped into a certain part of our brain that of course wants validation and also abates a creeping sense of loneliness that we have in modernity, which is partly a function of our using these devices, which makes us use them even more. And it renders the possibility of reflection, of perspective impossible. I don't think it's an accident that our president exists primarily on Twitter and exists primarily with sudden bursts of synapses snapping through other synapses.

Just to broaden this out a little bit to talk about religion and Christianity. This kills Christianity. And

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maybe I need to explain that inasmuch as it seems to me that the West especially, and all great traditions have always understood religion to be the place where one removes oneself from what Oakeshott, my favorite philosopher, called the deadliness of doing, in this beautiful phrase, because doing is deadly because every act you do ends and a new need arises and you have to do another thing.

It never ends. There's no peace. There's no moment of rest. And it is in those moments of rest that Christianity, for example, which is the tradition I know best, has always insisted we will know God. Our God is silent. You can go back to the hidden God of the Old Testament or the Gospels themselves in which Jesus is not that chatty. He's a religious leader that's constantly running away from the people following him.

It's funny, but it's true. He's often caught alone. Some of the most important moments in the Gospels, he's silent or God is silent. Whether it be in front of Pilate, the silence is among the most staggering silences in human history and literature.

Most of what Jesus did, it seems to me, and why he transformed human consciousness, was the way he was, not what he said. What he said was sort of brief aphorisms designed to convey what it was like to be him and to live in that zone, which is, in Eliot's words, the intersection of the timeless with time, someone deeply in time but utterly aware of its contingency and the openness and fullness of the universe.

And this gets to what I think is one of the more problematic aspects of contemporary Christianity, is that it's all in the head, that the practices of religious life, which require periods of silence and unthinking, the supreme expression of religious practice is ritual, which again is not in your head. It's in your body and your soul.

The ancient and important tradition of the Sabbath, where there is one day of the week in which you do not engage. You're not doing anything. Part of our modern sickness is that we've also made the Sabbath another opportunity to do everything and to be productive, as well as the notion that we judge ourselves by how much we've done. Every day, we get up feeling guilty for our lack of efficiency and our lack of productivity. And we're slipping behind, as opposed to something that one imagines Jesus never felt getting up in the morning. All the things I have to do today.

The core behind this is that if Christianity is to recover from what I think is a pretty serious collapse in the West, it has to re-understand itself as a way of life rather than as a set of orthodoxies to be intellectually assented to, whatever that means.

You know, if you really bury down into what faith is, is it extreme focus on the truth I'm supposed to believe in or is it being with God, being with our fellows and living the kind of life that Jesus seemed to live, which was actually, in its most radical form, completely indifferent to acquisitions, completely indifferent to productivity, to doing and more a way of being in the world. And that requires shutting up at some level. And it requires accepting silence and mystery at the core of religious life. It requires a kind of what really is spirituality.

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I want to end with just a little anecdote about my trip to Burning Man. The reason that Burning Man is interesting to me, apart from all the drugs and fantasies and art cars and all the rest of it, is it's essentially a festival created by the Internet elite.

It's dominated by the tech people of San Francisco and the Valley, many of whom are very young and many of whom are absolutely enveloped in that world and in generating and creating this world and actually devising more and more sophisticated ways to trap our brains into dopaminized distraction. You know, oh, someone loves me. Oh, someone liked this. Oh, I got another -- so it's like, oh, every few seconds you get a little validation. Oh, I have 30,000 likes or I have 10 things.

And what they do at Burning Man is there are two fundamental rules when you get there. The first is you're not allowed to use your phone. You put it away. These people that live on their phones decided to take a week out of their year to live without them, just as Steve Jobs, who understands very well what this business is, refused to let his kids use smartphones. And you have no money. You're not allowed to buy anything or sell anything. It is a violation of the rules of the place for you to exchange a good for money. So you put your wallet away.

It's a phony thing. But this creates a radical egalitarianism there that is much more of a sort of Christian way of life in some kind of weird way, if you can get past all the other things that are not at all Christian about the place.

And then, what's even more remarkable to me is that the focal point of the whole thing in a way is this thing they've constructed called a temple, which they build in this fantastic way. It's a modern kind of cathedral. But it's also a very temporary one. So it's burned at the end of the ceremony. Nothing is left behind. There's also something about the fact that this thing happens and then disappears into nothing that is also kind of spiritually interesting as a community. And in the middle of that temple, which is multidominational, the only way it really can be that is through silence. You enter that place and suddenly all the noise and drama of the scene descends into absolute silence.

And that is really prayer at its deepest, I think the being in silence. And that is what the younger generation, actually as human beings, crave, that in fact ascending and mounting depression that we see among younger generations, the isolation they feel, even though they're in contact with more people than they've ever been in contact with in their lives, they're not with them.

This is not actually being with someone. And that being with, which this curtails, is I think an essential part of what it means to be a Christian, even to the extent that, of course, Emmanuel means God being with us. And we have essentially made it impossible for us to hear Him at any moment, at any time.

And then, when we go to a religious ceremony on the weekend or whatever, it's just often even more pathetic attempts to distract you by interesting sermons or words or, worse, a sort of degradation of liturgy and spirituality that makes it sometimes this actually spiritually depleting experience.

So this is an argument for these things being a much more profound and dangerous threat to both our civilization and to our souls, as well in some ways the final ratcheting up of what Western civilization has

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been leading to since, dare I say it, the Reformation.

PETER WEHNER: Thank you. So it's the fault of the Reformation [laughter]. Thank you, Andrew. That was a moving and intimate talk, and thank you for sharing your interior life. That was helpful on so many levels. I will turn it over to Andy and then we will open for Q&A. So again, if you've got questions, let me know and, Andy, it's all yours.

ANDY CROUCH: Great. Andrew, thank you so much. I cosign every word of that and I'll just try to give a different angle on it.

I ended up writing this book about technology and family life because I was paying attention to what my audiences were paying attention to when I was speaking.

And I would say random little things about choices my wife and I had made in the course of parenting two kids who are now 20 and 17 years old, like not having a TV before they were 10 or going away on vacation and not having our email for two weeks. And after these talks, which were on other subjects, this line of young parents would approach, desperate for help in figuring out how to do what they were embarking on.

And my friends at Barna Research Group who study our culture, especially youth culture and religion, approached me and said, if we did some research on technology and family, would you write the prescriptive or normative side? We'll do the descriptive side. Would you offer a vision of what this could be like?

I said I will try. You can't really write a book like that when you're in the midst of parenting. You have to wait until your kids are old enough that you know you did not totally mess them up. So I thought, well, they were like 19 and 16. I thought I think I can give this a shot.

And when I told people I was working on it, they assumed that the main subject of the book was screen time limits for kids. This is the topic everybody's trying to figure out. How much screen time should I give my kids?

And as I worked my way through the book, I realized that was the very thing this book was not going to be about in three respects. I don't actually think the big issue is screens. As big an issue as screens are, I don't actually think screens are the biggest thing.

I think the biggest thing is something I want to call devices, and I'll explain what I mean by that, a word that I've inherited from a philosopher named Albert Borgmann, a Catholic philosopher of technology, who's the source of most of these ideas, to the extent they're good. So it's not about screens actually. It's about devices. And it's not about limits.

I think parenting by limits is the most depressing possible parenting. You used to have one time a week when you had to parent by limits. That was when you had to go through the line at the grocery store and there was all this candy in the funnel to the checkout aisle. And it was a commonplace among

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parents, like how do you handle that kid for those moments in the checkout line when they want to grab the candy bar. It occurred to me recently that's what parenting is all the time now, trying to limit an appetite for essentially visual candy that's being offered to our children all the time. And that's a horrible way to think about parenting.

So instead of it being about limits, I think it's actually about what we really desire. What do we really want from our lives and for our children, our own children, our nephews and nieces, grandchildren, neighbors.

And then, the third thing is it's not about screens, it's not about limits — and it's definitely not just about the kids. People say, oh, kids are on their phones so much these days. Have you seen the parents? If you go to a playground, at least the kids are still swinging on the swings. But the moms or au pairs or whoever used to be talking to each other around the edge of the playground—they're now all on their phones.

This is not about the kids. It's about all of us. So it's about devices. It's about what we really desire and it's about how all of us could choose something different, and better, I pray.

Very briefly then, what do I mean by devices? This is a term of art of sorts that Albert Borgmann uses to distinguish the long, long era of human history in which we extended our human capacities through tools and instruments.

Think of a spade. Think of a plow. Think of a musical instrument. Think of a medical instrument. These are things human beings fashioned to extend our capacities in some way. And this is coextensive with human history. We've always had these things.

A very simple example here in the humid South, if we weren't in this room, which is so cold that some of us went and got jackets to put on when we walked in, and we needed to cool ourselves off, we could fan ourselves with our own hand. (I've never been clear on it whether this is actually thermodynamically effective. It seems unlikely that it is.) But we could at least move some air past our skin, create some evaporative response. Of course, you could extend that. You could, you know, fashion a fan, a hand fan. And this is a very rudimentary tool that moves air past my face more efficiently and more volume than I have with just my hand. So I've now made a tool.

But the big transition to devices is when we create things that extend our capacities, but without our having to be burdened by being involved. So they disburden us of actually having to engage our own capacities.

When I get electricity and a little bit of basic motor engineering, I can engineer an electromechanical fan, which you plug into the wall. And without you having to do anything, it fans you. This is awesome, right? The dream of human beings all along was automata, things that would automatically do for us what we had to do for ourselves. And that's the basic transition to the device.

Now, we can extend this because you have to stand in front of the electromechanical fan. But what if

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we could create a whole integrated system in a building that would simply allow us to specify our preferred temperature and completely invisible and inaudible fans (although there was an audible one at the end of the morning session yesterday in some other building) but right now, there are invisible, inaudible fans constantly, cybernetically though, you know, controlled feedback loops adjusting the temperature in this room to a very cold level for Miami so that we never have to think about it.

This is the basic progression of technology. It's this big transition from tools and instruments to devices and then the progressive kind of elaboration of those devices and embedding of those devices in ever more complex systems until you finally have the kind of ultimate goal of technology, which I think the best two-word phrase for it is *easy everywhere*.

The goal of technology is to make all these things that once were quite burdensome easy and to do in a way that is just marvelously ubiquitous. Just cool air everywhere. We don't have to think about it. Don't have to engage ourselves. Completely disburdened from that.

This is just the story of the last hundred years basically because until we got electricity, we had only a very few devices. But now, every aspect of human life -- so transportation. You could walk. That's your innate human capacity. You could train or harness a horse, extend that capacity.

But then, there's this big device transition to the car, the mechanical car which then becomes the computational car. But eventually, of course we want just sort of on-demand transportation without us having to drive. And we all know that would be kind of the ultimate thing, easy transportation everywhere.

Or we can get in planes and we have this very complex system around us, airplanes, that don't burden us in any way except squeezing you into a very small seat. But without any effort of your own, you can go from Philadelphia to Miami, which I did two days ago, and go back, which I'll do this afternoon, God willing.

Making music, you can sing, use your own human capacities to produce tune, pitch and rhythmic sound. You can extend that with an instrument, play a violin. But then, the big transition is when you can suddenly put on a record or then a CD. That's the device. Now you can disengage. You can just listen to the music without having to make it. So one of the biggest transitions in human history, I think, is from the era where “to play music” means to humanly produce music to the era where “to play music” means to press a button and have music played for you.

And the complete transition, a hundred percent of playing music, until a hundred years ago, was human beings producing it. And now, I would guess of all the music that's played in all senses in the world, I'd guess it's 99.999 percent is the device style of play.

But then, the goal of that is easy music everywhere, which would be Spotify, Pandora. No longer do you have to select the CD, interact. You've now just got the whole catalog. Press a button. You've got it.

This is how we measure advances in technology. It's why Face ID is an improvement over Touch ID and

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why some of us have already preordered the iPhone X and are waiting for it to arrive. It’s even more important than actual technical advance.

Ethernet delivery of packet-switched data is actually a technically better solution in many ways than Wi-Fi. It’s faster, more throughput. But for almost all of us, we prefer Wi-Fi to having to plug into Ethernet. Why? Because it’s easier and it’s everywhere. CDs have higher audio quality than most compressed audio that we listen to on Spotify or whatever.

There’s an acoustical engineer, I think he’s at Cal, who’s been measuring what levels of quality people can detect in recorded sound. And he’s been doing this for decades. And people were able to detect more and more quality and preferred more and more quality until the mp3 era. And mp3s are horribly compressed. But actually listeners now prefer mp3 quality sound to CD-quality sound because they associate it with easy everywhere. It’s not actually better in a narrow technical sense. But it’s easier and more everywhere.

I think this is actually great for some things. I actually celebrate a lot of this and use a lot of it and love it. Two notable things that it’s really good for, one is this transition to devices and then to this kind of goal of easy everywhere is really good for harm reduction or harm prevention.

So think about the delivery of medicine. Do I really want a human being having to involve themselves in the delivery of a regular timed and metered dose of medication? I would much rather have a device that could do that because a device doesn’t get tired. It doesn’t get distracted. It doesn’t check its phone. It just does this one thing. So there’s lots of ways in which this reduces harm.

It’s also really good for scaling production. So when Andrew writes this piece in *New York* that’s so powerful that we would hope would get a wide audience, it can reach a wider audience of readers more easily than any time in history.

But this gets to the second question. What do we really want from our lives? And while we do want to reduce harm and while we do want to extend our impact and audience and the sort of fruitfulness of what we do, there’s a problem with this disburden. There’s three dis’s that devices do.

They disburden, relieve us of burdens. But they also disengage us. Devices disburden. But at the same time, they disengage. And this prevents us, I think, from progressing towards what we really want from our lives and from the world. How does the disengaging quality of devices affect us?

Well, I want to say what I think I should want from the world. This is basically the question of ethics. What is the good life? I don’t have access to a more complete and economical definition of ethics than what first comes to the Jewish people in the Sh’ma Yisrael: Sh’ma Yisrael Adonai Eloheinu Adonai Ehad. Hear, O Israel. The Lord is our God. The Lord is One. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul and strength.

This is the basic commandment. When Jesus is asked what’s the greatest commandment, he quotes it. He adds something. Interestingly, he says you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your

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soul. He inserts in Mark and Luke, all your *mind* and all your strength and love your neighbor as yourself.

This is what I want to want for my life: to love the Lord my God with all of these four things and to love my neighbor with all those four things I suppose. And along the way, it kind of gives us a very compact definition of what a person is.

What is it to be a person? I think it's to be a heart/soul/mind/strength complex, these four things bound together kind of inextricably, created for love. And what would it be to love with all of these four things? I suppose this involves imagining what's the ultimate extension or expression of heart, of soul, mind, strength.

Taking them in a slightly different order, what would it be to extend my strength so that I'm able to love with all my strength. I think this is what we call skill.

So strength is kind of the raw quality. But developed and concentrated and focused strength, all your strength, is to have skill. What would it mean to love with all of my mind? Well, I suppose the extension or the full development of mind is wisdom, deep knowledge of myself and others and God and the world.

What would it mean to love with all of my heart? I think we have a wonderful English word for having all your heart. Heart, by the way, in Hebrew is not primarily just the seat of feelings or emotions. It's the seat of will based on desire. It's kind of what gives you the heart to go after something that you care about. And we have this great English word, *courage*, from the Romance root for heart, that's the kind of fullness of heart.

And what would be all your soul? I haven't found a word for that except that I was very fortunate to apprentice as a musician in the black church. I'm a gospel pianist. I can fool some of the people some of the time with black gospel. And in black gospel, we learn to play and sing with soul, which is fullness of self. Something I did not learn from Mozart, though it's in Mozart. But I didn't learn it from Mozart. I learned it from the black church. And when you're in a worship setting or any kind of singing setting where people are singing with soul, there's this kind of total giving of the self.

Now, all these things -- skill, wisdom, courage and soul, in its biggest sense -- I think require full engagement. But our devices disengage us. They don't ask anything of us and then, I'm going to add the third dis-, they distract us.

So not only do they not ask anything, when I fly in the plane, I'm not engaged in any way. How is my heart, soul, mind or strength active when I'm flying on a plane? Minimally. But fortunately, I have devices to distract me from my disengagement and I would define distracting as non-demanding or non-formative engagement. There's actually a kind of shallow engagement that's very pleasant but doesn't actually form any of your heart, soul, mind, strength capacity.

Just a couple of comments on each of these. Strength and skill, we've been disburdened from having to

work physically. But we're now disengaged physically so that we're living through the first non-infectious epidemic in human history. Every epidemic in human history, and there's plenty of these still around, has been infectious, some infectious agent -- viral, bacteria, whatever. But now, metabolic syndrome — and the closely related situation of diabetes, the ailment of diabetes and pre-diabetes — is not infectious and yet it is the greatest public health crisis in the developed world. When people start to show risk factors for these, their healthcare costs go up by 60 to a hundred percent. And that's affecting a lot of us even as we sit here, because we're sitting here.

How is it affecting our mind and wisdom? Well, it's becoming very clear that these devices do very little to help us learn. Now, it's not clear that they're terribly damaging if what you're trying to learn is fairly technical.

It seems like kind of reading on a screen, reading on a book, it's not that different when you're reading kind of technical material, trying to absorb it. But even if they're not harmful to learning, there's no evidence they're helpful. The OECD has studied this. Countries that have more technology in the classroom don't have any better learning outcomes than countries that have minimal technology.

And it's clear that these devices are causing an absolute epidemic of distraction, which Andrew talked so powerfully about, that prevents the kind of quiet, alert state that allows us to truly concentrate, that allows for neurological consolidation of learning. And if we're not just after learning, but we're after wisdom, I just don't think our devices are helping us with this. So devices and the whole easy everywhere apparatus gave us incredibly access to Andrew's writing.

But it would be interesting. I would love to test this with you, Andrew, and maybe I'm wrong: I suspect that technology in the sense of devices easy everywhere did absolutely nothing to make you the kind of person who could write that article, except that it messed up your life in such an impressive way that you had something to write about. At least minimally, all the things that gave you the wisdom and heart, soul, mind and strength that was condensed in that 20 minutes that we just heard from you came from non-device-based experiences.

As for heart and courage, I think the most incredible example of this is Sherry Turkle's studies of why young people prefer to text rather than talk to each other. And it basically involves a tradeoff. You trade off information. I think these studies are reported in her book *Reclaiming Conversation*. She talked to college students about why they'd rather text. And basically, what they're trading off is when we're together in person, as we're doing right now, we are exchanging probably gigabytes of information per minute.

I mean, there's incredible amounts of information flowing between us. If I text you, that's kilobits of information. That's thousands and thousands of times less. And why would I ever trade off this richness of encounter where I'm accessing information sources I don't even have conscious ability to access. But I'm learning about you. You're learning about me.

Why would I trade that off for kilobits? Because I can control kilobits. I can control what you get from me. I can't in person. I'm stumbling over my words at times. You're picking up things in my body

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language that I may not want you to pick up. You're forming judgments about me that I can't control. If I could text you little bits of this talk, I'd be so much more comfortable, right?

And so, college students happily trade off richness of encounter for control of encounter. But then, that's a lack of courage, I think. And it also affects ultimately our soul. How well are we known? We're not well-known.

So in the last couple of minutes, our family decided we all needed to do something different here. And my wife and I did make some really different choices. I write about them in the book. I could talk more about them if you want. But let me just briefly say a couple of things we did.

We decided we needed to totally rearrange the furniture in our house. So our first big set of choices was about space. And we put everything that worked by itself at the edges of our house. And when you walk into our home, it's a fairly small home. It's not that much bigger than like this square area formed by this -- these tables.

What you'll see is things that only work if you engage with them. There's a grand piano, which we paid for with our kids' college savings when they were small. Books, a craft table with lots of art supplies, fireplace -- the original glowing rectangle that actually engages you rather than just distracts you -- the kitchen. And the TV, when we eventually got it, was downstairs. The devices get parked at the very edges because we want to create more than we consume. And we need nudges in our lives to like build our lives, and especially our kids' lives around that.

Oh, I skipped over this because I'm running over my time. And Andrew used his time so well and now I'm embarrassed because I have not used my time well. But I need to emphasize this. Where are we going to care most about this kind of disengaging, distracting, disburdening quality of technology? It's going to be in the places where we most are formed as heart, soul, mind, strength beings and the stages of life at which we're most formed.

The stages are life to me are the first two years, the first 10 years, the first 20 years. There's something about the first two years that's so profoundly formative, the first 10 years in a different way, the first 20 years in a different way. So we're going to especially attend, if there are children in our lives, how are they being given opportunities for this wholehearted, whole-soul, whole-strength, whole-mind engagement.

And then, of course, what are the most informative spaces? And it seems to me they're above all the home, also the school and for those of us who are part of religious communities, the religious community, the church or synagogue or other place of worship and formation. And so, it's in these places that we want to attend to space. And then, the other thing we started thinking about was time. And of course, the principle of the Sabbath has just been incredibly helpful. So we decided that one hour a day, one day a week and one week a year minimum, we would turn off all the things that work by themselves.

I don't just mean the screens. At our dinner hour, which is our hour a day when we turn these things

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off, we actually turn off the lights, the electric lights. Why the electric lights? Dinner by candlelight is way better and your spouse, as you age, looks like the spouse of your youth. It's awesome. Like it's this wonderful encounter that happens around a candlelit table. And the kids love it. And it makes it special.

And then, one day a week, for us this is Sunday, all these things are closed. And then, one or two weeks a year, we go away and we just shut it all off. My favorite day of the year is Friday before I go on vacation.

I have an inbox zero practice. And so, at the end of every day, pretty much I have an empty inbox. So that Friday with that empty inbox, I set up an auto-responder that says -- the subject line says, “Unfortunately I will never read your email.” And then in the body of email, I explain the auto-response.

I explain, no, no, really, I will never read it. I'm not kidding. It's going into an archive. If you tell me to go find it, I will. But I'll never see it. And I come back two weeks later to an empty inbox. It is the most beautiful two weeks of my life. And to me, that's just Sabbath.

There are more things I could say about what we've done. Keeping our phones out of our bedrooms, just absolutely crucial. Not starting the day with our screens. In the course of this book, I decided rather than get up, go downstairs, start my tea and immediately pick up my phone and see whatever catalog of outrage and urgency had appeared, that I would leave it there until I had gone outside.

I told myself I am going to make myself go outside before I check my screen. And the first two weeks, it was like pulling teeth to get me to not pick up the phone. And then, something flipped, I mean, quite dramatically after two weeks. And I went downstairs one morning and sort of glanced at my phone and thought I could pick that up.

And I felt this like physical sense of revulsion at the idea that I would do that before I'd gone out into creation and been a creature in my full self out in the world. And I haven't done it sense. Like I have no desire to do it. It's just -- it was like this flip, a cognitive flip, I guess.

So this is what we need to do. Our kids love it. So maybe I'll end with just a very quick anecdote. You don't get many triumphant moments in parenting. But one day, my wife and I were driving somewhere with the kids in the back. They were 16 and 13 years old, I think. And this has not been easy for our family and not easy for our kids. Our kids were weird. I mean, they were already weird. They would have been weird no matter what. But this made them way weirder.

And they were talking about it in the backseat. They were talking specifically about how hard it is in middle school and high school to have pop culture going on that you really don't access and don't know what's going on.

And then, Timothy, the older brother, says to his sister in a very kind of older brother way, well Amy, you see, this is because our parents are intentional. And they actually think about what's good for us. And not all parents really think it through.

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And then, Amy kind of interrupts him and she says, yeah, and actually it's hard at the moment but it's going to be way better in the long run. And Catherine and I are sitting in the front seat like just listening and we just silently high fived.

I think there's a way better life out there for us that is what we actually want. But we all have to choose it. We need each other's help and I think we have a chance to still turn the tide on this before it's too late. Thanks.

Q AND A PART I

PETER WEHNER: Thank you, Andy and thanks to both of you. I've got questions lined up. I'm going to take the moderator's prerogative though and ask both of you questions that came to me. And then, we'll go to Elizabeth, Robert Draper, David Brooks, Doyle McManus, Jon Ward and Will Saletan and then others who have it.

Let me first pose to you, Andrew -- and you can deal with this either broadly or specifically -- because you gave us the gift of sharing your interior life, one question I had, and maybe others would have, is: Why not be distracted from pain? We avoid it for a reason. I'm curious as to why you think, either spiritually or individually, why it's important to confront pain. You had a lovely line, quite an affecting line in your essay, where you said you absorbed a lot of your mother's agony and you discussed what that meant. The second question is -- and I know you're in mid-story, mid-journey -- but I'm curious as to how you think you're different as a writer or a friend or as a husband having gone through this.

And then, Andy, for you: You talked about “easy everywhere” and said that's what we're after. And I would ask you: Why *not* easy everywhere? You can deal with that from a teleological perspective, if that's the one that you want to take. The answer may be related to a verse that's had, for a variety of reasons, some meaning for me over my life, which is the verse where Jesus says my strength is made perfect in weakness. But that whole idea of not having things that are easy or that somehow there's something either about suffering or weakness, it's so countercultural, but there must be something I imagine that you think is deeply true and important to being a fuller human being.

So Andrew, if I can start with you, then we'll go to Andy and then we'll go to Elizabeth.

ANDREW SULLIVAN: Well, the reason I think it's important to embrace suffering is because that's what Jesus told us. I mean, that's the core message of the Gospels. It's only through suffering and pain that we really see God.

You know, I grew up in a church where every Sunday I looked up at the altar and there was a man being tortured, naked, in agony and the paradox of Christianity is that was a triumph. And I do think the attempt to banish suffering and pain from our lives, which is another part of the technological project and the modern project, is another solvent of any kind of faith.

I think the way in which the West -- I think this is underrated in terms of the collapse of religious faith in the West, is that the prevention and removal of suffering so far as we can in our lives is one of the

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primary objectives of our civilization. So the primary objective of our civilization is directly against what Jesus told us was true about the world. You know, my atheist friends will say, well, you're just using this as a crutch when you're in suffering. I don't think of it that way. I do think that suffering reveals to us the limits of our power, which is the first sort of recognition of our need for God. And the ultimate sin, what sin is, is the turning away from God. That's all it is. It's a shame. It's just a shame. It's why the West is sick, deeply, profoundly sick. I think that in terms of suffering is important.

I must say that the times in my own life when I've felt closest to God have been during periods of intense suffering, whether that was in my childhood or in my late 20s when everybody I knew was sick or dying. And you live through an experience like that and, whether you like it or not, that changes you as a human being. But I think it makes you more of a human being. This ultimate nightmare for modern modernity, suddenly there's a plague we can't stop and it's killing everybody you know in horrible ways. And it's going to kill you.

Suddenly you're aware that you will die. Of course you'll die. Suffering is a reminder of death. And focusing on death is one of the critical first things that Christians are asked to do. Christianity is a very strange thing. It's the most counterintuitive idea of being human. I understand why people find it bizarre. But there's no question that's what it is. I mean, it couldn't be clearer from the Gospels.

And also, you know, the real critique is that poverty is good. This is very hard for Americans to grapple with. But there's no question that's what Jesus believed, that poverty is necessary for faith because it renders you constantly vulnerable, which is the only place in which our pride and our notion of self-mastery has to cede towards the divine.

The West is, you know, in some ways a huge rebuke to God, certainly in the last 300 years. And that's one of the reasons why I was concerned about the consequences of this for our creation itself. I don't know whether I've changed. I think I'm a mix of massive failure and occasional moments in which I feel like I'm not dreadful. I was built for suffering, in other words. And there's a certain strain of Irish Catholicism that sort of almost fetishizes it.

PETER WEHNER: Well, we were fortunate to have had some of those moments when you were not here today with us. Andy, you want to take the question I posed? And then we'll go to Elizabeth?

ANDY CROUCH: Well, it's so consonant with what Andrew already said. I think for the purpose of dialogue, I think I may differ from you a little bit, Andrew, on one thing, which is what component of poverty is essential. And so, I would distinguish meaningful risk or meaningful vulnerability from essentially just absurd, absurd meaningless risk.

I don't know that I have any objection to using technology to mitigate my risk of riding in an automobile with airbags, seatbelts, so forth because if I get in a car crash and I didn't put on my seatbelt, I just don't see that as, I mean, God will use that, I do believe.

But the idea that I should just be exposed to kind of the existential risk in the world without it being part of a meaningful story, that it seems to me that Jesus allows the materially poor to come to see their

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material poverty as part of a meaningful story, that it's not just the meaninglessness of the world. And he invites those who are not materially poor to enter into poverty of spirit.

It's really interesting that that beatitude has two versions. Blessed are the poor, straight up, in Luke, and blessed are the poor in spirit, in Matthew. He invites them to the same kind of radical vulnerability that the poor have, that the materially poor have no choice but to live.

So I don't mind using technology to mitigate absurd, meaningless risk. But I do very much mind using it to mitigate away all the meaningful risk that makes us human. We had a saying as our kids were growing up in a pretty affluent place, that we repeated over and over for them: “The only thing money can buy is bubble wrap.”

What affluence allows you to do is insulate yourself from the intrinsic meaningful suffering of being a human being, as well as much meaningless suffering, in such a way that you are very insulated. But you also can't feel anything. You don't become anything.

And so, why not easy everywhere? I really don't mind it for certain kinds of travel. I'll happily sit on the plane. I don't need to fly the plane. I don't need to walk back to Philadelphia to have a transformative spiritual experience, I don't think. But the reason not to make it your paradigm for being human is it's ultimately very temporary. Life is not going to be easy. And you're not going to have this ubiquity available to you.

One day, your life will come down to a very small room. If you're fortunate, your life will come down to a very small room with a few people who know you and who you would trust you enough to be with you in your utmost vulnerability. And all that technology will be of absolutely no use.

And who will you be at that moment? And who you are at that moment depends on whether you were insulated in bubble wrap your whole life, and thus never developed any capacity of heart, of soul, of mind, or even strength to meet that moment with meaning.

And then, just one more, I mean, to bring it down to like the most mundane level, I think of this as the “getting the two-year-old to the grocery store” problem, right? The problem that many parents have is getting a two-year-old to the grocery store and back without a total meltdown and chaos erupting, right? It's very difficult for parent and child.

I know how to solve that problem for you today. Hand that child a glowing rectangle and your problem will be solved. You'll get to and from the grocery store in utter, placid peace. The only problem is tomorrow you're going to need to hand them that screen again and again and again. Eventually, you're going to need a bigger screen.

And what you're missing is an opportunity to say, okay, this is going to require a lot of wisdom and courage, first from the parent. How do I have the wisdom to shepherd my child through this awkward car seat experience and, you know, whatever. And it's going to require that from my child.

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But if I invest that today, it's going to be hard. But tomorrow, we'll both have a capacity we didn't have today. And over time, actually that trip to the grocery store becomes this amazing encounter with each other that it never will be if I just solve it every day.

So that's why not easy everywhere, because it's not going to be easy everywhere and we don't want to be the kind of people who have to have that to have rich lives.

PETER WEHNER: Thanks, both of you. Okay. So we'll go Elizabeth, Robert, David and then we'll take it from there. But Elizabeth, the floor is yours.

ELIZABETH DIAS: Thank you both so much. I'm sitting here wondering a bit about sort of the individual choices on technology use and device use. I mean, you both talked -- framed this discussion mostly in terms of personal choices. And so, I wanted to muse a little bit about community—communal choices in this.

Let me tell you why. To be totally honest, I don't know if anyone else is having this perennial internal sort of debate. But I am struggling—I'm really struggling listening.

Whenever—not just for you guys, but whenever this conversation comes up, in a really personal way, because I'm at once terrified of my device—not even when I'm using it, but in what the waves are doing to my brain or other people's devices are doing to my body. This is just deeply personal no matter what I do.

But four years ago, the one morning I decided that I was not going to check my phone before I showered, Pope Benedict had resigned, right? And like I had 900 emails. I was behind. And it was like I had already failed. And it was just like, of course, of course that happened.

But I share that story because it's not my choices really that matter as a journalist. It's like my particular community is, my editors are always what new device am I -- or what new app am I sharing my stories on.

Am I Instagramming my reporting or whatever? And I can be as disciplined and practiced and devoted to listening with sources and storytelling and this type of thing as I want. But I'm trapped by the culture.

And it seems to me too that I can only manage that to a certain extent, right? I'm stuck in this system that requires a certain amount of luxury to be able to push against. And so, I'm even thinking when you talk about Burning Man. Of course it's Silicon Valley's elite is going there because they have the means, you know, to have this great experience of not being trapped by tech. And it's not just journalists.

I mean, I'd be curious to think what you think of us in like how we handle this in a really personal and practical way. But it reminds me sort of like you talk about Jesus and Christianity being about poverty and the choice for poverty. But then, that immediately gets into, well, what about upon whom poverty is forced. And so, I'd love if we could explore this question together.

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PETER WEHNER: Those are great questions. Let me begin with Andy, and then we'll go to you, Andrew.

ANDY CROUCH: I think I have maybe three layers of response and it won't be fully satisfying because it's such a powerful, hard question. I do think there's something about establishing a personal practice of Sabbath, which is some rhythm of work and rest that even in the context of a very oppressive system allows you to be free of it.

Whether that's the first 30 minutes of the day or whatever—there are things that we can do even embedded in systems. There's just something very powerful about even the smallest amount of withdrawal that it's an assertion that I am not completely owned by this.

Now, that being said, the really striking thing about the way Sabbath is talked about in the Hebrew Scriptures is it's communal. And it specifically says, on that day, the seventh day of the week, you shall not work. Your maid shall not work. Your male servant shall not work. Your animals shall not work. The aliens in your town shall not work. Sabbath is not really Sabbath until everybody has it.

And the reality is that maybe only second to, “You shall have no gods before the Lord your God,” this is the most violated commandment in our society. We are a Sabbath-less society because the world of engines, devices, and easy everywhere does not need to rest. And our whole system is built for machines rather than people, rather than creatures I would really say theologically.

This is a profound violation of what it is to be human. You should not be in the position where you cannot take a shower or just attend to your restoration as a human being without being in peril, right? But we are in such a system. This is called injustice. And so, there's prophetic confrontation that is required. But how will it change? It will only change if people stop wanting this mirage of easy everywhere and always on access.

So we've got to start changing our collective imagination about what we really want from the world. And in that context, we could maybe start to affect these systems of injustice. And then, the biggest system is that only a few people get easy everywhere. There's a lot of not easy everywhere anywhere else. The whole thing is built on toil elsewhere.

Easy everywhere is built on toil elsewhere. And any degree of leisure or pseudo-Sabbath that I have when I set up my candle lights is actually the beautiful surface layer of an entire system of people all around the world who are mining raw materials, who are working in factories without adequate rest. And that's the biggest sense in which this is an entirely Sabbath-less economy that we're in.

PETER WEHNER: Andrew?

ANDREW SULLIVAN: The question of what does a journalist do in this environment is an important one I think because, you know, one is reminded of the etymological origins of the word journalism. It means every day, which was understood to be in itself utterly ephemeral. But every 10 minutes is not journalism. It can't be. And not only that, but in that competition of constant, instant response, you have no more authority in that context than anybody with a Facebook page or a Twitter feed, anybody.

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You're just one in a soup.

So, and that's what I discovered, I mean, because I was doing it more compulsively than others, although now everybody uses Twitter the way people used to blog. But blogging looks like writing a thousand-page book now compared to what your average tweet is.

My response was simply to—and you know I understand this is a luxury, although, I'm not that wealthy—I had to give up a certain amount of income, a lot of income to do this but I decided to write only three times a year at 8,000 words, which is why this particular essay emerged. I would never have been able to write this essay had I been blogging. So it's a kind of indication of what you can do.

And also, I have to say, you know, that one part of oneself as a writer is the thought that maybe something you do will last more than a day or a few minutes. And there's enormous satisfaction in that possibility. I don't know how you get out of this because the economics of it are such that the notion of a truly distant, not quite so immediate journalism doesn't seem to be affordable for people.

And because the culture has been so corrupted by this that no one can read it. And just remember also that no one really reads. The proportion of people who link to a piece who actually read it is tiny. There's also the allure of numbers, which this stuff also gives you which you didn't have before.

You have data that tell you you're good or bad or successful or unsuccessful that you can't deny and it's right in front of you, which inevitably shifts the journalistic consciousness towards how do I maximize those numbers, which is why your editors are asking you this, not how do I get it right. Am I saying something worthwhile? Is this true? Have I rushed to judgment? And so, I understand. I completely understand. It's systemic. It's a systemic problem.

And it's really sinful, to go back to Christianity. It's the great human temptation for life to be about us and pride and vanity, let alone the way in which this has generated self-promotion really as the key means of communication.

So you know, it sounds lovely, Instagram. But really, it's a series of lies designed to sustain an illusion of a life that you're not actually living. I haven't been on Twitter ever until recently when I just -- when Bob Wright, Mr. Buddhist, told me to promote my stuff on it because it was kind of crazy not to at least send out my piece every week. I'm shocked by it. I mean, it's just -- first of all, it's a sewer. Secondly, it's like being in a mental hospital.

But what are we doing when we're doing everything so other people can see it, as many other people can see it as possible. What does it do to that act of being with somebody when it has to -- or a conversation you have or even now, like the idea that things I'm saying to you, which is a shared experience, will suddenly have to be tweeted out. Why? Why? Why can't it be here?

JON WARD: Followers.

ANDREW SULLIVAN: Say what?

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JON WARD: More followers.

ANDREW SULLIVAN: Right, which is absolutely not the motive for writing, or it shouldn't be. So anyway, all I can say is that I totally understand and I don't know what to do, except get out of this field as it currently is and do something -- do something that's actually worthwhile.

MOLLY BALL: Unfortunately, I'm not qualified for manual labor, right?

ANDY CROUCH: There's a line in the Gospels, “I'm too weak to dig and I'm ashamed to beg.”

ANDREW SULLIVAN: There are other ways to use your mind.

PETER WEHNER: Andrew is now going to become a career counselor after this. Let me go ahead. I want to get Robert Draper's question in and we'll see how much time is left. We'll get David either before or after the break. But Robert, why don't you pose your question?

ROBERT DRAPER: Sure. Now that Andrew has appropriately shamed us, maybe I will refrain from going on Twitter and writing out the two hot takes from this morning. Number one, Jesus never wrote a to-do list. Number two, Steve Jobs is in hell.

I'm not sure if this is a question. Are we doomed maybe is the question. I've been thinking, listening to this and also because I've been writing a piece for National Geographic on surveillance about William F. Buckley and his definition of conservatism, standing athwart progress yelling stop. And wondering, you know, if there is a stop to this kind of hamster wheel, all of these competing paradoxes in a way that you guys have been discussing.

I mean, on the one hand, Andy, you saying that a lot of what we're doing, a lot of our technological compulsions derive from a desire for ease. And yet, it's unnatural, as Andrew points out, that it actually removes us from the thing which we are, social creatures and all.

And so there's the paradox of the bubble wrap, of, you know, insulation and ten of this sustenance that becomes a sort of gluttony.

And of course I'm struck, Andrew, by your invoking Burning Man and the tableaux of all of these techies surrendering first their iPhones and then their wallets, which makes me wonder, you know, but finally is this perversion, as you're describing it, of Western civilization needing to re-understand its way of life, is what's happened here, this perversion of our pursuit of happiness, a perversion that is engineered by Silicon Valley. Is it engineered by Madison Avenue? Is it the Garden of Eden? And so, I guess that is --

ANDY CROUCH: Garden of Eden, the latter.

ROBERT DRAPER: -- finally my question. You know, are we doomed or is it really transformative to do 10 days of meditation, one week of vacation, such that the other 358 days of the year are somehow better.

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PETER WEHNER: I'm not sure I should go to Andrew with an “Are we doomed?” question before we go back to, but --

ANDREW SULLIVAN: Well, yes, we are probably.

Most of the stuff through human history only resolves itself through a crash of some sort because we're human. But what it does point to, I think is the potency of spirituality to be reborn, the potency of Christianity and a new understanding of it, which is to reject the culture, to be truly countercultural and to operate as, you know, the salt of the Earth again.

And that requires literal disengagement from this particular culture, which is what the early Christians did in their time. And the sustenance of places which remind one, and the sacred places which keep this flame alight even in periods of great darkness. I'm thinking of the monasteries primarily.

One movie I recommend that did actually -- it's one of these few movies that really changed my life in a way is this documentary by Philip Gröning about the Chartreuse Monastery in the Alps.

This is a monastery that's been cut off from the rest of the world for 400, 500 years. It's a silent order. It's never allowed anybody in before Philip Gröning who wrote a letter asking permission to enter it and received a return 14 years later with all due, you know, timeliness.

And there, you have the silence. And the movie is simply about that silence. There's no word in it at all. You're just forced to marinate yourself in this and you realize, oh, that's the holy place.

I was fascinated by a moment in the movie when a young monk was tending a garden. I know this sounds kind of strange. But it's just the way he did the garden, the way he planted these vegetables, tilled the soil and moved around it. It was as if he was doing all these things without any intention of going from A to B. He just existed in this plane of timelessness in which he was doing things but not in order to get them done.

And that is holiness, I think. That is living in a different -- because part of what holiness is to my mind is living in a different time than other people. If you're lucky to meet truly holy, saintly people, one is impressed less by what they're saying, you know, their intellect. Just the way they seem to exist in a zone of time that is not the time that everybody else is living in.

And the reclamation of that way of being in the world, people are desperate for this. They don't realize it. But they're desperate. I mean, one reason why meditation is taking off is it's the one religious practice which seems to answer these terrible needs.

And I would say that an hour of meditation or half an hour or silent meditation as soon as you get up, just calming the whole time down and space is kind of an interesting way of living. It's certainly a way to break this. But it does require genuine countercultural activity.

And we're going to have to come back here because we've so pressed against the nature of what makes

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us humans that it's going to collapse at some point because we can't handle it. I mean, I look around me in this country, for example, and you see this immense anxiety and tension about this hideous presidency.

And everybody's living in the same world. It's the same world in their head. It's all in this mind thing. They're not actually with each other. They're not living different lives. They're not actually having a different narrative of their life. We're becoming this hive mind that simply exists up here.

And so, we're not living. And so, I mean that really profoundly. Certainly as a Christian would understand it, we're not living. And the other thing I would say, just a smaller side to this about lighting, overhead lighting is the worst thing in the world. When I go to hell, it's going to be Target basically.

And you're right about this -- look, humans sat around a fire for, again, I think it's so important for us to get the *longue durée* to see our current moment as a blip in the history of humanity. Whereas religion has always been with us as a human species from our very origins, things like fire and tools, which we can use because we put our bodies and minds in this process, ritual, dance, these things that are not mental, not intellectual, these are crucial.

And I go to churches today and there is so much light. There is. It's just insane. I mean, I go -- and there's so little silence. It's just staggering. And I can't tell you how powerful it is to be in a room, as I was, with 90 other people in complete silence together. It's very strange, how powerful that can be. And our constant need to put things into words and our constant need to validate ourselves is a blindness to what we need to be.

And so, I'm not pessimistic. I'm not that pessimistic because I think human beings adapt. I think this is very new, this final ratcheting up of everything. I think that the whole Western civilizational model of constant seeking of greater control of the environment and ourselves and of others and mastery of everything is hollow. It's ultimately hollow. It doesn't actually make us happy. It's making us miserable.

I mean, it's -- you know what, and obesity is a function of that too. And I think to some extent, you know, ask yourself -- I mean, I'm trying to grapple with the opioid crisis. There, people are numbing themselves in greater and greater levels.

And successful adjusted people are numbing themselves or at least distracting themselves with marijuana, which also has just had an incredible revolution since the smartphone. The attitudes have completely altered because it's a way of breaking the spell that we're in. It's actually a way of living again, or being more in our bodies and seeing with our eyes.

And the other thing I want to is nature. We're not in nature. We're not in the world that we're supposed to be in. I think of our culture a bit like street lighting, you just never see the stars anymore. So you don't really know where the hell you are. In fact, you're always in the same place. There's no sense of place anymore.

This obsession with travel -- why? It's a further form of distraction. Rather than being where you are

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and actually noticing and understanding the place you grew up in and noticing it with your eyes and ears and smell and it's so important for us.

We lived through, again, 97 percent of our existence of humans in a very -- in the same place, which we grew to know intimately. And that experience of place and being in nature as being -- I mean, one's worry is that with children being brought up on this, they never actually experience nature their whole lives. They don't actually experience friendship. They're actually experiencing less sex.

ANDY CROUCH: They've got easy-everywhere sex now. No bodies required.

ANDREW SULLIVAN: Oh, it's takeout.

ANDY CROUCH: Yeah.

ANDREW SULLIVAN: And it's images.

ANDY CROUCH: Yeah.

ANDREW SULLIVAN: Again, lies primarily, but images. And that way of meeting each other is now increasingly the primary way people meet each other for romantic -- among gay men, it's like 95 percent of all relationships begin online.

And watching the way -- just as a slightly -- gay culture collapsing, gay bars disappearing, all those places where we got to know each other, saw the diversity and variety of who we are and that kind of community that enabled us, for example, to genuinely survive this crisis, which I don't know if it happened again today, we would have the existing institutional and communal bonds to make that happen. Sorry, I'm going on.

PETER WEHNER: No, that's -- let me quickly -- Andy, you can go. And then we'll go to the break, I'll tell you what we need to do at the break, and then we'll start with David Brooks after we're done. So Andy.

ANDY CROUCH: Right. So I think we're probably doomed. I mean, really, and I could expand on that. But I actually think a more instructive thing, I think there is a real wonderful difference between Andrew and me.

There's hardly a word you've said I don't disagree with, except that there's this distinction, in certain kinds of theology, between apophatic theology and cataphatic theology.

And apophatic theology involves what you can't say about the divine, about God. It's the way of renunciation, the way of silence. And then, cataphatic emphasizes what you can say. And I do think my instincts are more cataphatic than Andrew's.

So I would put it this way. I think that if you have a practice which ultimately has to be sustained by a community -- that's a big footnote -- of a pattern of renunciation, this is what Sabbath is. Even biblically,

you know, Sabbath is not just one day. It's actually one year every seven. It's every 49 years, this massive reset economically. And there are also daily components to it, this pattern of letting go, so that then you can reengage with the world. And there's something very interesting that I'm sure some of you picked up on.

As I made my tool/instrument list -- let's just stick with the word instrument for the moment -- and my instrument/device distinction, you started to think of all kinds of interesting edge cases that don't seem clearly to be just a device or just an instrument.

And the ultimate blending of them is the Turing-complete universal machine, which is what this [iPhone] is. And this iPhone can be anything. It can be the ultimate device or it can be the ultimate instrument. That is, the ultimate way that I fully engage heart, soul, mind, strength with the world.

And I think the challenge for us is to take all of these things that could just be devices and turn them into instruments. Which means that I spend my hour a day without them at all. But then, when I go back to them, my question is, am I using this in a way that fully engages heart, soul, mind, strength, that fully connects me to God and others.

Now, there will be certain things that I can't use in that way and I'd just discard them. I can't use pornography in that way. I have to discard it. But most of my life, including the Turing-complete universal machine, it can be the ultimate distraction or it can be the ultimate opportunity for creativity and stewarding of the world.

So I think we have to choose the hard way of turning all our devices into instruments.

PETER WEHNER: Thank you for a really fascinating session.

Q and A PART II

PETER WEHNER: All right. If we can continue the spirit of what Andrew started of keeping our laptops closed, that would be great.

Let me just ask folks, because we've got such a stimulating session that we've had, keep the questions, if you can, tight and we'll do that with the answers as well because we've got a lot of people who would like to ask questions and a limited amount of time to do so. We will start with David Brooks.

DAVID BROOKS: Thank you. I've got a lot of jumbled thoughts on the Protestant work ethic because one of the things that struck me about the contrast between you two, Andrew, you move in a quietist direction and it's actually striking to me that two of the best bloggers in the world, you and Rod Dreher, are both Benedict Option personalities. I don't know why that is.

But you know, you merged suspicion of technology with the Oakeshott, the deadliness of doing, with the productivity ethic. I'm not sure that's a necessary merger and I sort of want to ask you about that. And so, you moved more in the quietest direction.

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Andy, you moved in an activist, fully engage, fully heart, mind and soul. And I would like to be activist with technology because I think you can be spiritually deep and have a total productivity ethic. St. Augustine wrote more than any of us could ever read. Dorothy Day was busy all the time. But they were certainly spiritually fulfilled.

ANDY CROUCH: Yeah. The Apostle Paul too, if you want to add a biblical --

DAVID BROOKS: Yeah, Paul and he did a lot of traveling, by the way.

And so, I really want to ask how can one use technology as an instrument in the fully engaged life.

And my two different questions, Andrew, when you were blogging, it was bad for you, but it was really good for me. And I miss you. Like I miss the days of your blogging. I would read you several times a day hourly when you were attacking Pete for being a war criminal.

(Laughter.)

PETER WEHNER: It just shows reconciliation can happen.

DAVID BROOKS: Yeah. So I guess I want to ask Andrew, do you feel like in scaling back, do you feel you're walking away from what you've been called to do with your talents and do you think you have less impact writing now weekly but previously, you know, three times a year?

ANDREW SULLIVAN: I have much less impact, and I'm okay with that. It pains me when everybody -- when I meet so many people that say exactly that to me and they look personally wounded by my walking away, although most of them understand why I had to do that for a while.

Yeah. I mean, I think it's also part of a process in which one's faith evolves over time and one begins to - one just has to reevaluate whether one really is using one's talents as best it was to do that, whether in fact writing longer essays might have more lasting impact in a deeper way than writing every 20 minutes about what just happened, which people enjoyed, I think.

And I believe we did about as good a job of online kind of information and thought and editing as you can get. And it's certainly far away from Twitter. But at the same time, I don't think there was a huge amount of wisdom. And I'm only doing even the weekly column now because we're in a political emergency. I didn't intend to go back to even writing a column. But that's just a moment in your life when you ask yourself why am I doing all this.

And yeah, and I think at some level, I am a bit of a quietist in that sense. I don't think we'll be judged by what we've done.

I think that when I made that sort of slightly ironic remark about Protestantism, I do think that in some ways, the Reformation was an attack on religion, certainly as it has been practiced, attack on it as a way of life and an attempt to make people think it through and believe it in a much more intellectual and

rigorous fashion as opposed to just live it and be a part of it.

And there's no accident that why then they shut down the monasteries. It was an assault on the quietest tradition within Christianity as well as imagery, statues, icons, practices, processions, rituals, all of which had to be abandoned in favor of this mind thing that somehow could assent to certain doctrines that one had to.

And when one asks oneself what does it mean to believe, does it really mean to actually take a certain doctrine and somehow will ourselves intellectually to believe it to be true?

And of course that is concomitant with the whole idea of efficiency and productivity, which begins the project of the modern West, this extraordinary, extraordinary experiment in human existence that is incredibly young, incredibly short-lived, is making people less and less happy and is environmentally unsustainable.

So in some ways, the longer I've lived and the more I've thought about this, the more I've come to view, you know, Oakeshott's final essay, *The Tower of Babel*. This is the Tower of Babel. It's Babel. It will come falling down. And the question is simply when.

And so, does one want to be in the midst of it as it falls down or do they want to take one step aside and say, hold on a minute, how do I watch this happen rather than be part of making it happen or how do I find a way, at least in the years I have left on this Earth, to do things that mean something as opposed to mean very little.

DAVID BROOKS: Could I ask a follow-up question? Andy, please defend the Reformation.

(Laughter.)

ANDY CROUCH: Well, I can't resist saying Jesus, when he reiterates the greatest commandment, adds mind. And I think Tom Wright, the New Testament theologian, makes the case that there is this kind of thing that happens with Jesus that requires a kind of new level of cognition and thinking things through. So that's my brief defense of the Reformation.

ANDREW SULLIVAN: Well, I think that would be more the way in which Christianity early on fused with Greek philosophy, which does make it different. But Jesus didn't call himself the logos. That was the Gospel of John. Jesus was not insistent on various aspects of doctrine at all.

And this great tradition, Jesus said I am the way, the truth and the life. And what does the way mean to modern Christians? I think it's a tradition that's been lost.

And more importantly, I do think that reasserting certain doctrinal claims, especially those that have a more tenuous basis in what we understand to be reality, is a way of accelerating the death of Christianity rather than giving it a moment.

I think the way to introduce Christianity to the modern world is through this, through recognizing the need that people clearly have right now for something other than this business.

ANDY CROUCH: Absolutely.

ANDREW SULLIVAN: And to start with that and then, in that space, which is the only space you have to really talk and be listened to or hear, to then build up into what that means in terms of what it's really like to live a fulfilling and holy life.

ANDY CROUCH: I agree with so much of what you're saying. And I will apophatically, quietistically, refrain from offering another counter-perspective.

ANDREW SULLIVAN: Why not?

ANDY CROUCH: Because of other people [wanting to ask questions].

PETER WEHNER: David, did you have a question for Andy?

DAVID BROOKS: Yeah. Well, it was just, you know, if Paul or Augustine were to have had this technology, what would they do with it?

How would they use it actively as a force for good on the job? I mean on the job. I'm sort of following from Elizabeth. Like the book is mostly about the home.

We've got to figure out this thing on the job.

ANDY CROUCH: Right, right. And I actually think technology is good for the job. So I see the sphere of work as the place where you take capacities that were formed at home, at school and other kinds of formative communities and unfold them for the common good.

So in that context, I actually think they did use all the technology available to them. Now, interestingly, Jesus did not. This is the really radical thing about Jesus of Nazareth. He doesn't write, except once in the ground possibly, although was he even writing words, I don't know. He doesn't use travel technology available to him. But his successors do.

And yeah, I think they would probably use all of it, but with -- well, probably -- I mean, given Augustine's personality, he would have been totally caught up in it, a lot like Andrew, and totally burn out and then would have like reconsidered and kind of recalibrated, like we all have to do.

In principle, I think this is actually what technology is for: the extension of human being heart/soul/mind/strength in the world through the work we do. And it's good for that. In that sense, I use it all the time, but only within disciplines and only with great care to the more formative parts of my life, not letting it intrude on that.

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PETER WEHNER: Great. Thank you. All right. We're going to do Doyle McManus, Jon Ward and Will Saletan. So we'll start with Doyle.

DOYLE MCMANUS: Thank you, Pete. This has been a really marvelous, marvelous morning all around. And I want to associate myself with your comments on the perniciousness of electric lighting, which sounds radical at the start. But I learned this.

We had a quite large party some years ago. And since we live in the Maryland suburbs of D.C., our power goes out all the time. And the power went out. And so, we lit candles and the electric music went off and there may even have been spontaneous singing, which is how people used to create music before recorded music.

And when the power came on after a couple of hours, everyone groaned and insisted that I turn it all off, which I did. And we've actually replicated that since. It's a better way to have a gathering.

Now, I have a simpleminded question. And Andrew, forgive me for this, but as I heard your narrative, on a really simpleminded level, what I was hearing was a narrative of addiction and recovery. So my question is to what extent is addiction the right metaphor for this phenomenon, not only in a self-help sense but also in the sense that maybe the great tragedy of the modern economy is that it has been diabolically effective at creating one form of addiction after another.

And then, finally though, to get to the self-help part, back to Andy, so we've taken the first step. We've admitted we have a problem. The second step though is harder. It seems to me what you're trying to do is figure out a way, actually Andrew, I'm interested. You haven't renounced technology. You're you're still trying to master it, rather than letting it master you. Okay.

So what you're trying to do is find the dividing line between technologies that distract and those that enable. So how do we need a wallet card to help us do that. That's my question.

PETER WEHNER: All right. Andrew, you want to take first swing at that?

ANDREW SULLIVAN: I do think addiction is a very interesting analogy. The question is what does addiction mean and I think we have a whole bunch of different ideas about that.

What I will note is that in our usual definition of addiction, which is some form of drug distraction or alcohol distraction or numbness, the only effective response is Christianity. I mean, AA is essentially a secular form of Christianity and in some ways, there's more Christianity going on in the basements of churches than in the actual churches themselves. It's interesting they often choose churches.

But it is a very simple, first of all, the renunciation. The acknowledgement, the renunciation and then the community's ability to sort of support you in your way of life, which involves people very intimately in your life. I don't have any personal experience. I have secondhand experience of a lot of this.

And the tenets of AA are so strikingly like Jesus' basic orientation that it's kind of stunning to me that in

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fact we have found a way to rediscover Christianity.

But it's in a non-doctrinal way and it's very potent. It's incredibly salvific for many people. And it's all about the way of being rather than a way of knowing. And so, I return to that thing. I also think that, by the way, on the lighting, these things that we take for granted, or central heating.

Human beings, again, we gathered around fires, which are constantly shifting and dynamic and unique events of warmth and light. And around that's where we talked. And so, we've banished, abolished that gathering. It used to be the hearth was the center of the home because that's historically where human beings have gathered.

So making it central air or central heating, removing all natural light, again, it's a form of dissociating us from the reality that as humans we live in.

PETER WEHNER: Andy?

ANDY CROUCH: Just briefly, I have become pretty persuaded that “addiction” has a useful specific meaning that involves certain kinds of mediation and pathways and physical dependence, so I hesitate to just make it a metaphor for everything.

And while I really agree with the spirit of what Andrew says, I am quite struck by recent developments in addiction treatment that seems to show that there actually are drug-mediated treatment for alcohol dependence that are actually quite effective, as much as I as a Christian might rather believe that AA is the way to go.

It seems like these very specifically physiological dependencies have physiological remedies to some extent. But as a metaphor, I think it's very powerful. I will say that I think what it actually is an instance of is a religious term, which is idolatry, which are these various elements of creation that human beings come to believe that if we orient our lives around them, we will be like God and we will not surely die.

So we will increase our authority. We'll decrease our vulnerability. And addictions are just our most familiar form of idolatry. In our modern world, we don't worship little figurines that purport to represent some aspect of the divine. But we are very familiar with these substances that give us that same fundamental reward.

So I see it more usefully as idolatry. And then, people ask me, well, how do I know if such a thing is an idol, because actually, as a Christian, I believe any created thing can become an idol when misused. And so, the wallet card question is what's it doing to your relationships? As you use this thing, as you orient your life around it, are you becoming more connected to God, if you're a believer? Are you becoming more connected to other people?

How do others evaluate it? Not just your own self-evaluation. Ask your spouse. Ask your best friend. And people know right away whether it is interfering and substituting or rather it's actually augmenting. So that's the wallet card discernment technique.

I recommend an app.

The app to defeat apps. It's called Moment and all it does is monitor your phone use every day and tells you what sites or activities or apps you're using the most and you can set your own target for reduction. It adds this element of guilt when you pick up your phone, that, oh no, I'm going to get a bad scorecard at the end of the day.

And do you know of it, Andy? I only started two weeks ago because it was another thing I was sort of thinking of. And the first thing that happens is you are genuinely shocked. I mean, there's a real shock to realize how many hours of the day you're looking at your phone. Like when I looked at it, it was five hours. And I understand that's kind of modest actually.

And two weeks, I've got it down to three. Sometimes it requires removing apps. It's also true that, you know, again, you're absorbing Twitter. You're absorbing sort of these tiny little micro-moments that really you can't remember them a day later, as opposed to if you actually read once a week or once a day a really reported piece instead of spending an hour watching updating news on a church shooting, if you simply waited until the next morning when you actually had some real information, then it would be easier.

And that of course would help us with all this distortion and false information, if we didn't need to know it now. It would be less likely to be false.

PETER WEHNER: All right. We're going to go Jon Ward, then Will Saletan and then Michelle Cottle.

JON WARD: Andrew, just real quick, what's the name of the documentary about the --

ANDREW SULLIVAN: It's called *Into Great Silence*. *Die große Stille* in German.

JON WARD: Doyle's story reminded me of a great website for songs, if you want to sing them in any activity.

On vacation this summer, I went to the farm of the guy who made the site and we harvested garlic and sang some of the songs. I sang some of these songs next to my grandmother as she lay dying recently. So, powerful stuff there.

So just Andy, if you could give one example of what you mean turning devices into instruments. I'm still trying to understand that.

ANDY CROUCH: What's a good quick one? Well, videogames. There's first-person shooters and then there's Minecraft.

And while I don't want young kids playing videogames at all, as kids get older, there's all kinds of algorithmic and design and artistic thinking that can go into Minecraft. And I'd much rather they be using their computer as a basis for design and algorithmic thinking than just a kind of simulation of

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vigorous activity. So that'd be an example.

And the ultimate example is use computers to program computers, right? So I would love for my 12-year-old to learn, you know, Swift or Java or whatever, because it's extending, in this case, mostly the mind, a little bit of heart and soul, not much strength. But that's using it in a very active, engaged, creative way rather than just a distracting, diverting, disengaged way.

JON WARD: Also Peter, the name of that website with the songs is WorkSongs.org. It's great stuff.

PETER WEHNER: Thank you. Will?

WILL SALETAN: Okay. So, well somebody around here has got to defend temptation and corruption and the Apocalypse. Sorry. I was just going to say that somebody has to defend the technology. So let me just make a counterargument quickly. Basically I want to argue with Andrew.

So Andrew, you said you're either present or you're in that world, right? But that is a world. And that world has people in it and they're the same people, maybe not experiencing the same way, but they're there. You said a couple of things, that you're not constructing relationships when you're in that world and it makes reflection impossible.

My experience is sometimes, I would say often, I do reflect. In fact, I'll take the hard case, Twitter. I'll take the worst case, the sewer, right? Sometimes on Twitter, and I am trying to have conversations. I have actually established relationships with people who I wouldn't have met in person.

And I have achieved a certain kind of reflection through that that I wouldn't have on my own. I've had people say things back to me that made me think and reflect on what I came in believing. So my question basically, isn't it true that we do build relationships and reflect online, that we can? And therefore, isn't this fundamentally a challenge and an opportunity and, in particular, a task of -- I know this is a bad word these days -- but management.

It is a management problem. I think Doyle mentioned addiction as a good model. I think that's excellent.

Andy, I think what you said about carrying the rectangle around and handing it to your kid and the next day you have to give it, that all makes sense to me. What do you do with addiction? You confront it. But really what you're doing is managing it. Isn't that a better way to look at this than to treat the technology as a mortal, cultural threat?

PETER WEHNER: We'll start with Andrew and then, Andy, you can reflect on it.

ANDREW SULLIVAN: In my blog, I developed an incredible relationship with the readers. It was one of the most rewarding relationships of my life and it was with a hundred thousand people a day.

And it's kind of striking how, when I bump into them, and I do all the time, they think they know me because I was very much in their lives for so long. And it's a very strange experience. But of course they

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didn't know me. You're not dealing with persons when you're communicating with other people online. You're communicating with a shard of a person, an avatar of a person, what they want to present to the world or simply their argumentative skills or their quip ability on Twitter.

Now, of course it's not that, if you learned nothing ever from this, it would be really unlikely. I mean, that's very unlikely to happen. Of course you're going to have moments of enlightenment and reflection because you're engaging with other minds. And so, that's kind of fantastic, right?

The question is at the expense of what. At the expense of I realized I had lost the ability to read a book, which is a sustained act of attention.

My memory went to -- well, I mean, it was already staggering. But it sort of collapsed during that era because the brain is constantly sifting so much information, it can't store it. So it shoves it away. It moves it. It gets rid of it.

And when do you look at these thinkers or writers from the late 19th century. They'd read all the Classics. I mean, their reading was prodigious and they'd done it in a careful, studied way and then they had interactions with others that they interacted with through letters or through personal meetings. And that was incredibly fruitful for the West and for them and we still read them because of that. We'll never be reading yesterday's Twitter in 20 years' time.

So, and as long as you insist, as I do, that it's either/or, and in fact, we know that even this new study that shows that even if you have the phone in your pocket, part of your attention and working memory is impaired. I mean, they're beginning to do better and better studies of this. But the very notion you might be able to consult something immediately renders it a distraction from your brain and your memory declines. Your working memory actually does attenuate and eventually disappear, I mean, if you're on it all the time.

I don't really think that's a very decent standard to hold. In other words, I think anything should be able to pass that standard.

The question is how much time do you spend on it for how much you get out of it and whether a different way of understanding, whether replacing information with knowledge is a good tradeoff. I think it is.

But it requires a resistance to this. It's too potent. The thing is also that social media especially it seems to me, because human beings—and again, I go back to evolution—because our very minds developed in part because we were gaining information on other people in our group—in other words, gossip turns out to be a critical feature of our ability to actually think and talk, that when information comes to us from people we kind of know in our circle, it's so much more compelling to us. These people have deliberately hijacked things that human beings are particularly vulnerable to and want.

For eons, we're like we need to know what that guy in the group is really talking about and who he really is because he could be a threat to me or he could be a threat to the group and so on and so forth.

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Gossip, gossip, gossip. And that's part of how they hook information. In other words, you're not reading and absorbing fact or argument as a way to understand the world better. You're actually absorbing it to understand where someone is.

Twitter really is a bunch of people posturing all day long, right, and jockeying for social position. It's not really about the sharing of information. It's entirely I'm the biggest journalist on the tree. Look how many followers I have, blah, blah, blah. It is. That's what it is.

EUGENE SCOTT: Andrew, how is that different from real life? I guess I'm struggling with when you say you're meeting a shard of a person, that's every small group gathering. That's every congregation. That's every family reunion.

And I understand. I mean, I think we're just going to have to agree to disagree on this. But I move in circles very often where I am the only person who sees the world like I do culturally, theologically and politically.

And if it were not for Twitter, I would not have been able to form a meaningful relationship with someone who I would not have come in contact with in real life, not just by sharing the minds, but sharing our hearts. There are people I know who I've talked to for the last two years who I haven't been able to meet yet, but I hope I do.

I'd just push back on your idea of what being means and the limitations of it. And I respect and understand and appreciate the limits that you have to put on yourself and encourage me as well. I'm not pushing back. I'm like let's rethink this.

But I can't accept the idea that just because that that's not real, that some of these relationships aren't real and that there's something inherently authentic about doing life with you in person that is impossible with someone on social.

ANDREW SULLIVAN: Well, I would return to what Andy said earlier, which is, yes, of course you have an interaction with other people's minds. Of course you do. And they can express their feelings too and you can get a sense of who that person is. But spend 10 minutes with them, you'll learn, you know, so much more about them.

EUGENE SCOTT: Sure.

ANDREW SULLIVAN: It's a question of the shallowness of these encounters as opposed to their depth.

And the question is do we want to expand the range of our shallow encounters rather than cultivate the range of meaningful and full-bodied and engaged encounters that human beings have always had.

And there's part of me that loves that idea. I'm a bit antisocial. I loved being online because it meant that I could also talk about things that would be hard to talk about with one another. On the other hand, if you can't say something to somebody's face, there's something phony about it.

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MATT LEWIS: Can I make a point about the addiction part? Because it strikes me that right now, we're wrestling with being in this world, but not of this world. And I do think there's an analogy with the addiction thing.

I mean, there are some people who simply should not drink. They cannot drink and if they have one drink, they'll have 10 drinks. And then, there are other people that I think would agree that drinking, being a drunk is a bad thing and that it would lead you to a bad lifestyle, but they could occasionally have a drink over conversation with somebody and that would be fine.

And I think that, in a way, this is an addiction and we are wrestling with that. You know, used in a proper context, in the right dose, the right dose, social media could enhance your life. But it's very dangerous and seductive and I think that there are people very similar to other forms of addiction.

ANDREW SULLIVAN: Gambling is a really great analogy in terms of addiction because you're constantly pulling close to see if one person eventually might say, oh. And every time that happens, you're like, oh, it was worth it. It's worth spending the last two hours because suddenly this guy or this woman said something interesting to me. And that's just that.

And it's like everyone, by the time you're finished and when you look at your day, you've been looking at these slot machines all day long.

MATT LEWIS: And I think for people in journalism, to go to what you said earlier if someone said to me I have a problem with crack, I could say, well, don't do crack, you know, if you can.

But you know, if you have a problem with a food addiction, you can't say to somebody well, just don't eat anymore, right? You literally have to eat. And so, then it becomes much harder because you can't take the radical, I'm never. And I think those of us who are in this trap, that's our problem. Like, I have to self-promote. That's actually part of my job.

And if I don't self-promote, then I can't make money to take care of my kids, to make sure that they go to a good school where they don't, you know, become like me, so. Addiction.

PETER WEHNER: Let me just ask you, Matt, and then I want to continue the conversation. To use your analogy about drinking, of the people in this room, how many do you think—just give me a majority or a percentage—are drinking too much, because I think most people aren't alcoholics. That is, the majority can handle a drink and they don't go to it.

I think what Andrew is arguing, and if I understand Andy right, that there's something about this particular set of temptations; that there are certain human vulnerabilities and technology, it has this capacity to lock in on them in a way that the other analogies don't work as well because the alcoholism is a different kind of thing. And I think this is probably true for most of us.

And I would guess, just to be personal about it, I actually only went on the smartphone earlier this year and that was only because I'm so awful with directions, I had to take my son to a soccer tournament in

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Richmond and I didn't want to get lost again. And I sort of wish I hadn't because I've seen just in the course of that time how much time it consumes -- including, I told Andrew, I would check my iPhone when we were at red lights. I remember a couple of years ago with my older son, seeing him do that when I was driving with him, training him to drive. And I said, “You can't do that. That's completely irresponsible.” And I was recently thinking I have a 13-year-old and I was like, “I shouldn't be doing this anymore.” So what is your sense to that? And then, Andrew, you can take it up and then Andy, because we've got a lot of things on the table.

MATT LEWIS: Yeah. No, I do think that there is an analogy to the other forms of addiction and that some people are probably more susceptible to falling down the rabbit hole than others. But I think I would also agree that there's something uniquely seductive and tempting about technology that is different than other addictions.

ANDY CROUCH: Can I offer a few thoughts? Well, just a slot machine note. I am told—unfortunately I don't have two sources on this and I haven't found the original source but I trust the person who told me: The average Tinder user, Tinder being the dating app, swipes for eight-and-a-half hours a week. Eight-and-a-half hours a week. Now, I don't know if that's median user or average number of hours. But either one, it's just stunning, right? And it's an example, it's the power of intermittent reinforcement.

There's a very deep question here, which is the question of media. So media comes from the Latin for middle. And media is whenever you take an embodied relationship and put something in the middle of it. So right now, in this room, we're having a nearly unmediated relationship, except that we have inserted one element of media, which is amplification for our voices. So you're not hearing my voice in its natural embodied form. You're hearing a representation of it.

So the question of what's the value of interposing something in the middle. Now, what does this allow me to do? Well, it allows me to project my voice actually more naturally. And we're recording it. So it's going to be further mediated for other people. There's going to be more in the middle for them. Even in the room, it allows me to speak in a more natural way. I'd have to use much more unnatural vocal production to fill the room without the mic.

There's obvious value in this for disseminating ideas. And Molly, you interjected a really good observation. What about writing? Like writing is media. Writing is mediating. It's interposing, you know, written language and, often at a distance, between the author and the reader.

And on the one hand, I think this is a very good thing. And on the other hand, I think it has a lack to it. Let me put it that way. There's something missing in it that I actually think generates a hunger for the full encounter of persons.

Will, you said something that I half agreed with and half didn't. You said that world has people in it. And then, Andrew really pushed back and I had kind of the same thought. I was like, well, it depends on how you define people.

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If I am to take my definition of a person from this foundational ethical imperative, love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength, then I ask, are there heart/soul/mind/strength complexes fully represented in that mediated world?

I think the answer is no. That only happens in personal encounter. And what you want, when you have an encounter with that shard of a person, in a somewhat pejorative way, or that representation or avatar that awakens something in you. You want to meet that person.

And Eugene talked about this. You've been having these conversation for two years. And the drive is to go meet them. I actually think the more effectively simulated the media is, the greater the hunger for embodied encounter, which is why people who appear on screens rather than just through text are celebrities in a way that text people aren't.

So I don't have a hunger to meet Andrew Sullivan, who I've read lots of his text, in the same way that I have a hunger to meet—what's a non-self-incriminating celebrity I would like to meet—I don't know.

[unidentified voice]: Miley Cyrus.

ANDY CROUCH: Miley Cyrus. Thank you. I was actually thinking Taylor Swift. All right. Like if Taylor Swift walked in, I'd be like [panting] because I've seen her on a screen in a very high fidelity representation.

But it's mediated. And it generates this kind of hunger for encounter. But I have that sense of hunger for encounter with Andrew as well because his words have been meaningful to me and have engaged me.

And this question of the ethics of mediation is like one of the deepest questions of our time. But I think what we need to say about it is it's not categorically bad.

But it does leave something, some fundamental human hunger unfulfilled that only happens in that encounter that is out of my control, that is full of information, that goes in unexpected directions, that ends up with awkward silences, all of these things that happen when we're together.

Sherry Turkle has this wonderful thing about the seven-minute-moment in a conversation where, for about seven minutes, you can sustain small talk. And at about seven minutes, she has this beautiful line: “Someone in the conversation has to take a risk.” And consistently in her lab, what people do around the seven-minute mark is they pick up their phone.

And that basically says we're not going to take a risk. We're going to keep it shallow so that we can always divert into this other thing. And I just don't think that [kind of risk] happens through mediation. And that's where all real discovery and wisdom happens I think, is on the other side of the seven minutes.

PETER WEHNER: Great.

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ANDREW SULLIVAN: Three short points in response to that. One, yeah, you have a real relationship in the way you really have a thousand friends. You don't. You can't. Actually human beings are not designed to have more than maybe 15 to 50 actual people they have relationships with. We just can't. We think we are. But we're not.

Secondly, as an addictive question, it has two things that make it different from other things. One is that, as Pete said, it's interactive. In other words, it is constantly adjusting itself to adapt around your resistance to it. So it's a constantly evolving addiction that will not let go of your dopamine receptors. And we have an entire industry making money off this and technology enabling it, like these algorithms that just are burrowing into our minds in a way that alcohol would love to but doesn't quite have the ability to.

Secondly, unlike these other things, it is always with you. That's why the phone comes in. You used to have this where you'd be on your laptop or on your iPad at home or something, in which you had a place that was reserved for this. The fact that some kind of space where you had some boundary between it and the rest of your life. The phone has removed all of those boundaries. So it's there constantly accessible, available at the flip of a switch, touch of a phone. And of course that makes it harder.

It's like an alcoholic has to carry around a flask of whiskey every minute of the day or, you know, someone who's into crystal meth having a little dose in their pocket. It's like always. Just prove that you can resist it. It's incredibly more potent than these things.

PETER WEHNER: We've got Michelle Cottle. Eugene, you were in the queue and you may have asked your question, and if not, then we'll go to you. And then, we've got Molly, you had asked a question and then Reihan. So we'll go with Michelle first.

MICHELLE COTTLE: I was particularly struck when you were talking about the technology giving you a false promise that you're never going to be alone. You know, it's a distraction from the sense of isolation. For me, this has very strong echoes of just kind of the long-term basic anxiety people always have about modernity, which is you have a lack of spiritual faith and the lack of that has this hole. It's produced a hole. You don't have meaning. You don't have purpose. And something's going to fill that hole.

To some degree, you know, is this just part of a continuum of, you know, spiritually speaking, especially with younger people? I mean, you're always hearing about despair or the opioid crisis as you lose your purpose and you get sucked into something else.

But that's what I think of when you're talking about a distraction from some kind of hunger or quest for something more. And you can just sit and Twitter yourself to death on it. So is this part of that continuum?

Bu then also it's a chicken and an egg question. We have this hole. And so, this pops up to fill it or something else would have filled it. I mean, that goes to speaking of a deep spiritual emptiness.

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PETER WEHNER: Great. Andrew, you start and then we'll go to Andy.

ANDREW SULLIVAN: It's an accelerant of the loss of faith and then the void it's helped create, it then fills. So I think of course it's that.

Of all the possible temptations or ways to fill the void, it's one of the least socially harmful. You could join the Trump cult as a way to or you could believe that policing your speech every day so that it's ultimately a means to be radically inclusive of all people at all times is a form of virtue.

The void is there. It has to be filled. This has filled it so easily.

And maybe it's not the worst thing socially in the sense that everybody numbed on their Twitter feed, they're not likely to foment revolution, although sometimes, of course, that's the opposite happens.

The isolation this requires translates into a kind of passionate politics as religion or movement as religion. I mean, the alt-right is empowered by these lonely people online finally meeting each other. It's also dangerous in that respect.

MICHELLE COTTLE: So actually it should be better in that case.

EUGENE SCOTT: So is ministry and great work. I mean yeah, we could talk about that. But yeah, obviously that's the whole point. I agree with you the worst can come of this. I just don't think it's always all bad, all the time, for all people.

ANDY CROUCH: Yeah, when you describe Twitter, Andrew, I know exactly what you're talking about. But it's actually not my experience of Twitter because I follow one person on Twitter, Augustine of Hip Hop, who has some really great, great flow channeling Christian orthodoxy. And that's the only person I follow.

You can use Twitter like a device and you can use it like an instrument. I think it's not one thing. I think blue checkmark Twitter is kind of one thing. But I don't aspire to have a blue checkmark. I don't care if I have a blue checkmark. I don't follow people with blue checkmarks mostly. So it just depends on how you use it.

But this thing about filling the hole, I don't think what modernity took away from us was first of all faith in God. I think modernity took away personhood. Now, as a Christian, I believe to be a person is to be made for a relationship with God and neighbor. But modernity is built on a series of explosions of power that depersonalized human life, the first being the transition from land to money as the form of wealth. Money has alienated, depersonalized wealth.

Then, the transition from bodies to engines being the source of work and engines are depersonalized ways of getting work done. And then, Claude Shannon, 1948, the transition from wisdom to information as the kind of currency of knowledge. Wisdom is embedded in relationships. Information is just accessible through information theory and can be represented digitally.

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It's modern information theory that gives us computation, allows us to make the world computable. And each of these revolutions vastly increased the amount of power available to human beings, but also removed us from the conditions of being persons. So that I can now have an economic transaction without anyone knowing who I am. I can learn things without anyone knowing who I am or me knowing them.

And this is the loneliness. This is the modern bargain. To get all this power, we said, the only price is you're not going to be a person anymore. You're not going to be in a place, like Andrew was talking about. You're not going to have people who have known you your whole life from birth to death.

And is there a massive hole from that? Yes, there is. But now, we've got a way for you to be distracted so you never even fully notice. And the great paradox is the only way to fill that hole is actually go to into the hole. It's silence, solitude, fasting. It's what Andrew did.

And when you actually empty yourself and stay there through the discomfort of it, you find there's something on the other side that's real and that you don't need to be afraid of, even though it's tremendous, in the deep sense of the word.

PETER WEHNER: Let me just pick up on that and then we'll go to Eugene, if you want to have a question, and then we'll go to Molly.

David and Mike and I had a conversation about three or four weeks ago with Francis Collins, who's director of NIH. And he had mentioned a former surgeon general who had gone around the country to try and understand what was happening to the country, the distemper of the country and the anxiety of the country. And he came away with a report, or at least a verdict, that there was what he called an epidemic of loneliness.

And it does strike me the causation here. But it is notable that at this time in which you've had these enormous advances in technology that were meant to connect us as a supplement to human relationships, something else is going profoundly wrong. And you see the manifestations.

Andrew may be doing an essay on the opioid epidemic. You see these sharp rises in teen depression and teen suicide. There is a kind of fracturing and dissolution of human relationships, of isolation and loneliness in this moment of incredible technology, which was supposed to play a part to heal that. Something isn't squaring up here. And that's I'm sure worth more --

DANIEL LIPPMAN: Do you know the reason for the epidemic of loneliness? Is it just the modern technology and how people are unable to interact with that in a good way?

ANDY CROUCH: It is modernity, I really think. When I've asked people who are visiting the U.S. from less developed nations, I say what do you notice about the United States that I might not notice.

I've probably asked this of about half a dozen people over the last 10 years. Almost every one of them, the first thing they say—these are visitors from like Uganda or El Salvador, not necessarily undeveloped

places but just less fully Westernized, modernized—they consistently say, “I notice how lonely people are.”

And the first time I heard that from a Ugandan friend, I immediately thought, oh, that's the most true thing you could possibly say about America. And I never could have said it myself. I never would have been able to name it. And once he said it and then others have said it since, I'm like, absolutely. It's the structure of modernity to give you access to power, at the price of your not being treated like a person.

PETER WEHNER: In case they have them, David and Mike have both written—in fact, Mike actually wrote a column on what the surgeon general found. David, you've written a lot on it. I'll ask you: Do you have any reflections on what Daniel was raising, which is what you think is driving this epidemic of loneliness and the technological piece of it?

DAVID BROOKS: I don't have anything that comes right to mind.

MIKE GERSON: Vance Packard wrote a great book in 1975 called *A Nation of Strangers* that's sort of—it's dated, but rings true.

PETER WEHNER: Who wrote it?

MIKE GERSON: Vance Packard and it represents a kind of earlier moment and in a way what led to what led to what led to the current predicament.

ANDY CROUCH: Yeah.

PETER WEHNER: Okay. Thank you. Eugene, did you have a question?

EUGENE SCOTT: Yeah, just briefly in response to Andy's comment about millennials preferring texting opposed to actual conversation, which I definitely think at the very least is somewhat problematic.

But I would love to hear your thoughts on you referred to it as a lack of courage, the desire to limit the gigabytes that are shared in communication. And it's been my experience in talking to people, be it meaningful conversation with people close to me and just even distant, more shallow, surface-level communication, that it's not as much a lack of courage as much it is an awareness that the world is not as safe and people aren't as safe as you'd hope they would be.

And so, it's a level of self-protection because if I can limit some of my interaction with you, to your point earlier, I can protect you from taking in something that allows you to not only conclude the worst, but actually treat me poorly and more differently—in the ways that you may not have been able to if you just had text.

And that's not a defense of limiting conversation or sharing or doing life together. It's an acknowledgement that sometimes the desire to put up walls is, oh gosh, this is Trump's argument, is to protect yourself from something that you know firsthand to be harmful.

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ANDY CROUCH: I hear what you're saying and I hope this wouldn't seem like too direct a response, and I could be wrong.

But I actually think discovering the world is not as safe as you thought, and other people are not as well-intentioned toward you as you wanted to believe, and that if you open yourself to them, they will hurt you, and then choosing nonetheless to go into relationship with them — [that] is the definition of courage.

That is what courage is. It's knowing it's not safe. But for the sake of something good, I'm going to offer myself. And so, to the extent that it is the case — and I don't think actually it's the only story of why people text, people also text because they're very mobile and they just want to stay connected. They want to feel connected because they have technologies of power that let them move around so much and they want to feel like I'm still in touch with Eugene. And I actually have no problem with that.

But this other thing that you're identifying, to me, I actually think that's exactly what courage would be: nonetheless I come back to you after that wounding.

ANDREW SULLIVAN: Can I just ask one thing about the content of these quasi-communications with these shards of people? One of the things I first realized using email was flame wars, that those were the days, flame wars, in which suddenly you found yourself disinhibited because you weren't confronting the full person, from saying things to them that you would never say to their face.

And the immediacy of it was unlike actually writing something down and sending it because it caught you in the actual heat of that moment. And then, so that reveals that you're not actually talking to other human beings.

That is why our political discourse has so fantastically declined so quickly because we have become utterly used to an environment of unbelievable personal invective. And the way in which this has been used, and is constantly used, as a means to shame and destroy by never seeing the actual person, it's a process of dehumanization in a way that enables one's worst instincts to come out.

I mean, I'm genuinely shocked every time I see some of these things that people say about people online. You know, it's just really shocking to me.

I mean, on the blog, every day—normally most days—this one guy would write to me and tell me that I was suffering from AIDS dementia. And you know, I laughed it off but after a while, you're just like why is this person saying this. Like why is this? And it's because he had no idea that this was a human being.

EUGENE SCOTT: I completely agree. I think any of us who cover this administration—and I mean, I was on a panel, not to like do this as a pissing match, but I've seen the if you are a member of the LGBT community, if you are a woman, if you are a person of color, if you are a religious minority, the way that people tweet you and respond to an argument you've made that have absolutely nothing to do with that comes from a perspective as if they've completely forgotten that you are a human being.

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ANDREW SULLIVAN: And the other side too. The way that people talk about white people on the left, if you just transpose the metaphor, it is blanket dehumanization of large numbers of people on the basis of an arbitrary characteristic. It's bigotry.

And so, this also facilitates a profound coarsening because we're not actually relating to one another. We're relating to these very superficial forms of people online, which makes them invulnerable, you think.

But of course, deep down below that, they're actually a human being and they're also incredibly lonely, which is why we have—certainly among teens, and especially among girls—it seems, this massive increase in suicide and suicidal tendencies because what was horrible in the sort of ostracism and mean-girl kind of culture in reality becomes even more when you don't even have the company of others, when you're feeling alone as well just becomes psychologically intolerable.

Imagine the stress we've added to our lives. Most people didn't have to live lives so publicly before. It's a horribly—one of the things I would say is that this is partly my own biography. I mean, I became pretty well-known pretty early and not without a whole bunch of stuff about it, which was okay. But after a while, you begin to realize that this is a tool of vanity and self-preservation. And so, any number of sins compounds. And the value of something no one else will know about -- Christianity is about, at some level, doing things that no one else will see. Jesus is very clear about this. No one is going to give you credit for this.

This is about a private transaction or a private moment of grace or of generosity or of forgiveness or of mercy that requires, for its integrity, for it not to be known. And everything is now done in order to be known by as many people as possible, which transforms our human interaction with each other.

PETER WEHNER: Thank you. All right. Last two. We will do Molly Ball and then we will do Reihan. So, Molly?

MOLLY BALL: Thank you. I want to go back specifically to the parenting part of this discussion because the example that you mentioned, however flippantly, was you go to the playground and the moms are all on their phones. I'm that mom and I hear that all the F-ing time, right?

And it strikes me as a piece with our society's obsessive need to police parenting and moms specifically, because it's something we all can agree on in our culture. That person is a bad mom. She's doing a bad job.

And I don't think that's true. I am grateful that I can be at the playground with my kids and also be checking my email, also be communicating with other adults, have some kind of escape and distraction from the tremendously mundane drudgery that is most of the time you spend with your kids.

You know? I mean, in our parents' generation, the way you exposed your kids to nature and got them to grow into independent beings was not through these carefully choreographed interactions that you created and presented to them. It was by kicking them out of the house.

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And now, we've made that illegal and created this expectation for parents that they must be constantly parenting in an immersive and all-consuming way. And I would suggest that this is a sort of shackling of parents, specifically women.

It's a historically female profession to their children in a way that I don't think is productive. And I think actually, to sort of take this full circle, what we end up doing is raise up children who expect to be constantly entertained. And that creates this whole problem, right? And instead of having them be able to fend for themselves or not need screens, not need television, whatever.

So, to take this over to sort of Andrew's part of the discussion, I think it's very easy to say we shouldn't be doing things all the time. But somebody has to do them. Somebody has to do the dishes. Somebody has to watch the children. You can't have a silent meditation unless somebody is staffing the church daycare, right? And again, historically that person has been a woman.

So you know, the life of the home is intensely isolating. And I think we found a cure for that in some way. We allowed, you know, women and parents to find each other and to engage in the life of the mind and adult conversation while simultaneously taking care of these mundane tasks.

I wonder why we have to pathologize that and why we can't celebrate it.

EUGENE SCOTT: I was just going to say very briefly to Molly's point, if you want to have a conversation about the delay in parenthood among millennials, what they view parenthood to be, their fears and anxieties about parenthood, that part of the conversation needs to be taken into consideration, not solely because sex is cheap. It's because when they see how this society treats parents, it's not an attractive option to many of them.

PETER WEHNER: Andy, you go. And then Andrew, if you have anything that you want.

ANDY CROUCH: So many fantastic things in what you said. I mean, yes, I completely agree. And you know, it's interesting. That was the example that came to mind, for interesting reasons perhaps.

But actually what I had in mind was not that people were being bad moms in any way. Kids don't need supervision [on a playground]. Like there is nothing [for the mom] to do. While the kid's on the playground, that's the whole gift of the playground, right?

But I do think, just in the way we've been talking about it, that there's something being missed in the chance to actually have adult conversation with the people who are there with you at the playground, in their heart/soul/mind/strength complex presence, rather than your preferred set of interlocutors who are mediated through the device.

It has nothing to do with the quality of the parenting in that moment, but maybe something to do with the thickness of community that is or is not present in that actual space. These are your neighbors. They could be the ones who help you. You know, like if you knew one another, several people—one person could supervise several kids.

And the other observation I'd make is about this statement, which I absolutely think is an accurate description: "Life in the home is or can be intensely isolating." That is an inconceivable arrangement of words to human beings before about 300 years ago. The idea that your home, the place where you were embedded in a multigenerational set of relationships, in a larger community that was right next to you, knew you, often were related to you with all kinds of degrees of relationship, that that would be the place of isolation.

Now of course, there's conflict in any home. There's moments of feeling alone while you're together in any home. But what you're describing, where the mother, often, is with one or two children at an early stage of life, with no support, with no relationship, no thick network of community surrounding that person, both of kinship and affective kinship — that is a profoundly modern situation.

There's this idea in calculus of local minimums. When you're solving for a problem, you can find a place where any movement in either direction gives you like a less optimal result, you could say. But a local minimum is not the same thing as the optimal minimum or the lowest minimum. It's an awkward analogy because we always want to go higher when things are better. But in solving calculus problems, lower is better.

And I really think what you're describing is truly a beneficial local minimum, given the conditions of late modernity. But it's way sub-optimized for what it is to be a child, a mother, a father. The father and mother used to be working together, somewhat different roles no doubt, but in proximity to each other.

And all the degrees of isolation, my gosh, that we now have to contend with. I totally understand why people turn to mediated ways of managing that. I would never want—the point is not to criticize that. It's just to say is this what we want, and is there a better way to do it? I think there's a better way to do it.

PETER WEHNER: Andrew, if you had comments.

ANDREW SULLIVAN: Once I don't. I think everything Molly says is obviously very powerful and I'm not arguing everybody should go into a monastery, although Jesus was utterly indifferent to these things. That's all.

I'm talking about Christianity. The core of Christianity is an indifference to doing at some level, not being with or giving, but that kind of doing. Secondly, the only thing I would add is that we always regard boredom as the great enemy. But boredom is actually one of our greatest friends. It's the moment when we start creating because we're bored.

And so, we create our own distractions, which are part of our life, which are part of our reflection upon our lives and that we also know scientifically that the brain is more creative when it's fallow, when it's going through these tasks that are mundane in themselves and sort of intrinsically boring, leaving aside the sexism question with women in the home, et cetera, et cetera.

But nonetheless, boredom was always a huge gesture, along with silence, of our lives as humans. And it

was in those moments that we became ourselves because we were generating an understanding of ourselves from within ourselves rather than seeking to be created by all these things outside. It was an inner-directed, rather than outer-directed meaning.

Everything else, I think Andy's right in terms of how isolating this can be and also just how—again, being with other mothers or in that situation, creating those alliances—I remember growing up in a small town. You know, and we were kicked out in the morning.

But I also had like various mothers down the street were auntie this, auntie that. We all know who they were, Auntie Chris. You know, these were names I knew. And we created these wonderful lives for ourselves as children.

And that we're losing childhood in that way and we're losing real play, which is often spontaneous, that kids make up rules for themselves and generate all sorts of weird thoughts and practices in which the goal is not necessarily to win or to get that satisfaction but to be with one another in a zone where you're not actually achieving anything.

Play is another feature of human life which is not about doing. And lo and behold, if you look at, again, 97 percent of human existence, enormous amounts of boredom, enormous amounts of play.

PETER WEHNER: Reihan, final question.

REIHAN SALAM: The fact that everyone here is a person who is considered to be someone who has a valuable voice, who has the legitimacy and authority, people who are worth listening to, that's the idea.

And then, you think about all the people in your life, let's say your parents or others, who don't actually have that experience of having been considered at one time or another someone with a voice worth listening to. I think that this is part of what is so disorienting for at least some of the folks in this room.

To go from this context in which you are someone with the legitimacy and authority with which to speak and yet you're also allowed to be sometimes not entirely perfectly coherent, you don't have to always fit in every way. You can say things that are somewhat contradictory. And you're given that room because -- part of it's because these interventions are oftentimes quasi-public.

That is, they are sort of public but imperfectly so, so that the people who are listening or the people that you imagine are listening are people who will understand the ways you're deploying irony. They will understand some of those contradictions.

And I think the thing that is so disorienting about some of these technologies, and this is to Eugene's point, is that, you know, you suddenly have this flattening of hierarchy in which there are new people who are able to take part in these conversations.

These are people who are not necessarily going to assume that you can be a little, you know, messy or even that actually you can kind of have two ideas existing at the same time in your head, which is

actually part of being human.

That's part of something that's kind of incredibly important and valuable. But you can't expect that people will give you that benefit of the doubt.

And you know, I'm reminded, this is a very ungenerous characterization of some of these arguments made in the vein of the Benedict Option. But there's this idea that for a certain kind of person, you are used to not being understood as a racist or a hateful person merely by virtue of having this or that thought. But again, you can't assume that people outside of your context are going to kind of believe that or embrace that or give you the benefit of the doubt.

And I guess one way of looking at is that, well gosh, now you're just having this experience of a lack of safety, to what Eugene had said before, that kind of was once particular, certain kinds of people. Or actually, let's flip it around. There are only certain kinds of people who had that authority and who had that feeling of safety. I'll just say for my own purposes, I kind of feel like I'm part of a hybrid generation. I think that kind of rather arbitrarily, I was treated as someone who has things that are worth saying.

Partly it's because when I was a kid growing up, I didn't have a distinctive regional accent. And so, people assumed that I was smarter than I was. But you know, honestly, there are lots of little things like this that you don't even necessarily register. I think that for people like me, it's particularly discomfiting, this experience of having that taken away from you. I mean, that's why people retreat into these communities.

So one thing I've found is that there are many people with whom I once had very good conversations. I experienced them electronically and then I think, my God, these people believe things that are completely whackadoo.

And then, I have conversations, private conversations with them again, and then I think, oh gosh, actually this person is deeply sensible. But it's because you're once again experiencing them as people who are like embedded in all these contexts.

One little example, I'll just end with this. There was an incident some years ago in a little town in the Deep South where there was a young lady who wanted to bring her female partner to a school dance. She was then ridiculed and hounded for this. And then, what happened is that every single person who ridiculed her was then ridiculed and hounded by literally tens of thousands of people from around the country.

Now, you know, one consequence of this is, well, they're getting their just desserts. They're kind of experiencing this and sort of that's the righteous thing. The other thing that happens however is this hardening of identity, this sense that, gosh, we now share something in common. IS your take-away from it, actually this thing that I thought was a kind of fun, swarming thing to do is actually shameful and I now realize that people who have real cultural capital kind of now look down on me. Or is your feeling like, well, I've been silenced in this way. I mean, it's probably all of those things at once.

THE FAITHANGLEFORUM

TRANSCRIPT

“Technology: A threat to the human soul?”

Andrew Sullivan and Andy Crouch ♦ November 2017

PETER WEHNER: Go ahead, Andy. You've got a reflection?

ANDY CROUCH: You're so right. It's such a mess, this context-less kind of capacity that, on the one hand, gives many more people a chance to have a voice but also makes it much harder to modulate how we hear each other, understand what we're hearing. I mean, I don't know in the moments we have [left] that we can even articulate a solution.

But I think it's a very powerful articulation of the problem. And ultimately, we have to rebind actual personal relationships. I just think there has to be more attention given to the face-to-face relationships that allow us to understand one another.

And that can happen not just in local towns. That can happen in settings like this. But if it doesn't happen, we're really in trouble.

ANDREW SULLIVAN: Two quick thoughts. One, yes, it compounds tribalism. And the people who would otherwise not be forced to go on the record about their political beliefs do say something on Facebook and suddenly they're defined by that in a way that, in previous lives, they would have just talked to a couple of friends. And then, they'd also be able to have less fixity to their position.

So you kind of force them into a position that they don't necessarily want to hold. But human pride requires them to keep at it, which cements this tribalization as well.

Secondly, the one great thing you miss in these conversations is crucial. It's tone. There's no tone in a text or a tweet. There's no nuance. There's no complexity and the other thing you notice is that --

MICHELLE COTTLE: Which is why you have to put sarcasm after a comment on Twitter. You have to actually write it out or somebody out there is going to explain to you why that's wrong, no matter how obvious.

ANDREW SULLIVAN: And eventually, if you're communicating in this medium, you also know that nuance is not going to get as many people to click on you as a non-nuance. So it also militates against any sort of complicated or middle ground or mixed position. That's why we have Trump.

PETER WEHNER: We'll end it on that note. I just wanted to tell you this was my maiden voyage. I'm glad that I did this and I am extremely grateful to the speakers, Molly and Andrew and Andrew and Andy, for your great presentations and to all of you for your great questions. And it was really a terrific joy to be with you.

END

This transcript has been lightly edited for clarity.

The Faith Angle Forum is a program of the Ethics and Public Policy Center.

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