

4 Steps to a Healthier Relationship with Technology

by Tom Mahon

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I've written about digital technology for 35+ years, most of the time in Silicon Valley. Over the decades our evolving devices, and what we can do with them, have dramatically transformed almost every facet of our lives -- from how we bank, travel, and shop, to more abstract realms like how we derive a sense of self-worth, how we forge and sustain relationships, and how we choose to spend our attention. I think the first step to getting a human and humane handle on this rapid transition from a nature-based to a digital-based society is for us all - individually and collectively; technologists and the public - to step back from time to time, catch our breath, and re-visit our relationship to technology from a more conscious and empowered place.

To me this involves engaging in the 4 P's. Put simply, it's about taking the time to Pause. Perceive. Pray/Meditate. And Practice.

Pause

One of the greatest threats to our well being now is the incessant barrage of marketing "noise" we receive from our consumer electronic (CE) devices. It's estimated that the average person sees about 5000 ads a day -- that's over 80 percent of the messages we get each day -- and most of that registers sub-consciously. Much of the digital content we get every day is designed to frighten us, titillate us, and make us greedy and envious. And we don't even know this is happening. Might that have something to do with the coarsening of society that we sometimes experience?

We are constantly at the receiving end of a tsunami of destabilizing content. But we are under no obligation to accept it, or take in any more of it than what serves our aspirations and highest purpose. We can control how much we choose to expose ourselves. Pause and think about that. Pause to develop composure within yourself. To focus on the signal of meaning in your life, and minimize the noise and blather that comes at you constantly -- much of it delivered by our always-on devices.

Perceive

Throughout history, science and technology were largely concerned with things in themselves: stars, atoms, levers, microprocessors. And philosophers and poets were more interested in connections between things: love, mercy, justice. But in the last century the physical and life sciences have focused more on relationships. The theory of relativity measures everything in relation to the speed of light. Big Bang and evolution theories show how the present state of the universe and the biosphere are the result of measurable processes over time. The life sciences reveal that the mind (psyche) and body (soma) are extremely interdependent.

Perceiving and appreciating the interconnectedness of all things is no longer for mystics or poets alone, but also for hard-core physicists and microbiologists now. Involvement in the web of existence is not an optional activity.

Whatever holds existence together – whether we call it God, Tao, super symmetry – it deserves our awe, attention and, respect. So when we pause, we need to also perceive. And that means to see as well as to look; to hear as well as listen. Perceive the interconnections that are all around us and within us and without us.

Pray/Meditate

St. Benedict who established the monastic order in the 6th Century that kept law, medicine, scholarship and faith alive during the Dark Ages, observed that the Latin word for prayer (ora) is contained the word for work (labora). Doing appropriate work with appropriate tools is prayer. Francis of Assisi, the patron saint of the Silicon Valley area, said, “Pray always, and if necessary use words.”

If we hope to reintroduce notions of virtue and values back into the scientific and engineering enterprises, mindfulness is the stepping off point. All spiritual traditions practice this: the cultivating of a keen awareness of what a given situation is, how to respond to it, and what will result from that response.

That’s also the definition of engineering, rightly understood. As we practice mindfulness we develop an understanding of our interconnection. We absorb the reality of our interconnectedness into the core of our being using the ancient spiritual technologies of stillness and silence. Whether you call it prayer or meditation or something else entirely, it is a priceless tool.

Practice

We can make effort to be mindful and composed when using our tools -- at work, home, school -- and intend the outcomes to leverage kindness. It can’t be done all the time, but we can start and build on the practice: be calm; be kind.

Be conscious of your actions and thoughts so that from among all the options before you, when you use a tool, you choose the one most likely to produce kindness. In the past that was called virtuous behavior. And it's called a practice because it takes work over time, but with more practice the process gets easier.

To the extent possible, every time you use a tool - whether pencil or supercomputer - practice doing so in a composed frame of mind, and intend that the outcome of the effort is an act of kindness. This isn't possible much of the time, of course, but it's a start to rethinking technology as if people matter.

Pause. Practice. Pray or Meditate, and Practice. These four simple approaches have the potential to transform our relationship to technology.

In closing, here is a short verse that speaks to the essence of our current condition:

Nature is how universe-mind touches our own mind.
Tools - technology - are how our mind touches universe-mind.

When these minds are aligned, there is success-in-living.
When they are misaligned, there will be catastrophe.

Mindfulness in our tool-use is essential now,
For our success, our sanity, our survival.