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News that Inspires

Tools of Our Tools & What To Do About It
by Tom Mahon

We've become the tools of our tools;
And the fault – and the solution – lies not in our tools, but in ourselves.

The digital revolution promised so much at the outset: computers would make air travel safer, health care more affordable, and education more widely available.

But for all the evident benefits – and there are many – the tools have taken over the toolmakers.

- Complex algorithms, beyond human understanding, replace even the most high-valued jobs, including the jobs of algorithm writers;

- Yet even as jobs and income disappear, mobile devices bombarded with messages urging endless consumption of finite resources. The resulting frustration is leveraged by powerful media to keep the public in a state of fury and frenzy;

- What jobs do remain demand that we work at superhuman speed to keep up with superfast silicon systems;

- Opaque institutions demand that our lives be absolutely transparent to them, even as hackers can rob us of our very identities;

- Wall Street and Silicon Valley are allied in putting impenetrable walls around ideas (IP) in order to monetize those ideas (IPOs), creating an economy that puts a price on everything, but is unmindful of the value of anything.

When greed, gain and self-aggrandizement are the inputs, then waste, rapacity and rage are the outputs, ravaging the environmental, communal and personal spheres.

And even as we are increasingly drawn into the dark side of the digital ecosystem, it's increasingly obvious that extrication is increasingly difficult.

So where do we go from here?

First, consider that the purpose of tools is to leverage our limited human abilities in order to accomplish ever-greater results. Archimedes said, "With a lever long enough, and a fulcrum strong enough, I can lift the world." And he could if he had a place in space on which to rest the fulcrum.

Tools developed in three phases over history. From early on, they leveraged our muscles.

With the six simple tools of antiquity - the lever, pulley, screw, wheel, inclined plane, and wedge - our ancestors created civilizations: clearing fields, draining swamps, and building temples and towers for the gods they imagined and the powerful who controlled them.

Then about 400 years ago, our ancestors began to develop tools to extend the senses: first, the telescope and microscope, and later the radio and television, allowing them to see far out, deep down, and long ago.

Beginning in the early 20th Century, we developed tools to extend our brains: computers, the Internet, smart devices, the 'Cloud.'

But even as our ancestors developed tools over time to leverage their muscles, senses and brains, they also developed tools to leverage their soul, or atman, or psyche, so as to be composed within themselves, and thus try to establish just and civil societies. These spiritual technologies included prayer, meditation, chi gong, yoga, ethical standards, communal worship…

In the past century, revolutions in transportation and communication have enabled the leveraging of spiritual technologies profoundly.

With soul-tools, especially non-violent resistance, Gandhi and his followers brought down the British raj; Dr. King and his followers brought an end to the Jim Crow laws in America; Mandela, de Klerk, et. al. ended apartheid in South Africa; and Lech Walesa, Karol WojtyÅ‚a and their supporters brought down the Iron Curtain. And these world-changing events were accomplished with minimal violence.

But Gandhi and others showed it is not enough to bring down wicked regimes. There must be livable alternatives.

Beyond taking a stand against the leveraging of waste and rage, we need to incorporate the two universal pillars of wisdom - composure and compassion - into our use of tools.

How? First, whenever you use a tool – whether a shovel, a pencil, or a supercomputer – do so in a composed frame of mind. That isn't possible most of the time, especially in work situations, but it is something to be aware of and to strive for.

Then, to the extent possible, consider the outcomes at the other end of the leveraging process. When you apply energy to any tool, the results are usually much greater than the inputs. That is the whole purpose of leverage and of tools. Strive therefore so that the outcomes manifest kindness, or at a minimum cause no pain and do no evil.

When jangledness of mind is present at the inputs, the outcomes will be jangled and hurtful. And people at the receiving end are then likely to express that anger and pain in their own tool use.

And so the cycle of violence propagates and increases with each spin of the wheel. Gandhi and others showed that the pernicious cycle could only be broken when we are composed in our tool use.

So to the extent possible, be mindful of that when you put energy into a tool. And strive for outcomes that manifest kindness and compassion, even if you never see those results.

This model – of composed and mindful inputs leveraged to produce kind and

compassionate outcomes – is admittedly not possible for most people much of the time. And by itself it is not a panacea for the all the environmental, communal and personal despoliation resulting from tool use run amok. We have a long, hard slog ahead of us. But every individual effort in that direction, however small, does represent a step in reconnecting technical capability with social and moral responsibility.

There is a second process we can initiate when the rush and disruptions of the digital revolution wear us down. Find others who share your concerns, your situation, your pressures, and then meet and talk with them. Alcoholics Anonymous, among other recovery programs, is good example of how this works: regular meetings with like-minded people provide the chance to speak, with assurance of privacy, about how they are dealing - or not dealing - with stress and pressures in their own lives. Sharing concerns with others similarly afflicted, in a safe place, is a proven first step in dealing with them.

From such meetings at the local level, a new economy of sharing, bartering and promoting the common good may emerge to create meaningful work, and counter the current corrupting global financial system whereby one's gain comes only at another's loss.

Individual efforts to be composed when using tools, so as to leverage kindness in the outcomes, can in turn be leveraged by joining with others to share, inspire and protect.

These actions alone do not represent the beginning of the end of the negative consequences of the technology revolution. But they may be the end of the beginning – of the feeling of helplessness and hopelessness brought about by the growing awareness that we are now the tools of our tools.

If we had the ingenuity to invent the devices that increasingly control us, we also have the ingenuity to reclaim our rightful ownership of our tools, so that humane inputs will secure more just, healthy and benevolent outputs.

Pray for peace; work for justice.

Nature is how universe-mind touches our 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.