Nancy Colier: Waking Up from Our Addiction to Technology
by Tami Simon

Nancy Colier is a psychotherapist, interfaith minister, meditation teacher, and the celebrated author of books such as Inviting a Monkey to Tea: Befriending Your Mind. With Sounds True, Nancy has written a new book called The Power of Off: The Mindful Way to Stay Sane in a Virtual World. In this episode of Insights at the Edge, Tami Simon and Nancy have a frank discussion of the large-scale modern addiction to cell phones, email, and social media. Nancy offers ways one can recognize addictive behavior and how we can break out of compulsive cycles around technology. They also talk about parenting in the digital age and the importance setting appropriate boundaries when it comes to electronic media. Finally, Nancy considers the need for a "digital detox" and how it is imperative that we all set aside time to spend in silence.

Tami Simon: You're listening to Insights at the Edge. Today my guest is Nancy Colier. Nancy Colier is a psychotherapist, interfaith minister, author, and veteran meditator. She has a private practice in New York City where she also leads ongoing groups and workshops on mindfulness in everyday life. She's the author of Getting Out of Your Own Way: Unlocking Your True Performance Potential,and Inviting a Monkey to Tea: Befriending Your Mind. With Sounds True. Nancy has written a new book called The Power of Off: The Mindful Way to Stay Sane in a Virtual World, where she sounds the call for wakefulness, reminding us that we can use technology in a way that promotes, rather than detracts, from our well-being. The Power of Off provides an essential resource for anyone wanting to create a more empowered relationship with technology in the digital age.

In this episode of Insights at the Edge, Nancy and I spoke about how many of us are addicted to our smart phones, addicted to checking our emails, and being on social media, and how we can recognize that our behavior is addictive and begin to change how we prioritize what matters most to us, instead of mindlessly engaging in addictive behavior. We also talked about parenting in the digital age, and how to be fierce in setting appropriate boundaries as a family related to the use of technology. We talked about methods for digital detoxing and the importance of spending time in silence, in stillness, to explore the depth of our being and not only be immerse in the noise of our monkey mind. Here's my conversation with Nancy Colier on waking up from our addiction to technology:

Nancy, as a practicing psychotherapist in New York City, I'm curious to know right here at the outset what birthed your passion in understanding how technology is affecting us in our contemporary life?

Nancy Colier: Well, what I was seeing in my practice—and not just my practice, but really everywhere, in my home, with my friendships—was that people were walking around in kind of a chronic state of anxiety. In what I called "twired," a state of being "twired": tired

and also wired. Exhausted, fundamentally exhausted, and also amped up and anxious. I was seeing in my practice that it's standard operating procedure now to bring your phone in and leave it on. In the one hour a week that you have to finish a thought, to have some silence, or if someone had a big job, they felt they couldn't miss that hour to be reachable. I really was just becoming more and more curious about what was happening to us.

Probably, the inception of the book was a moment maybe six or seven years ago, when I had just joined Facebook. I remember it so well, where I read a post from a dear friend of mine—a grown woman, about 50—and she had posted, "Just got up early, had a great morning bike ride, and finishing it off with a refreshing acai juice." I remember in that moment having the sense, "I have no idea what's going on. I literally don't understand—at a very primal level, I don't get why she would do that." It wasn't even a judgement with it, it was just the sense of fundamentally not getting it, and also realizing that our lives were in a pattern of change that we probably could not even fathom, that that would be a reasonable thing to do.

So, all these components came together. I live in Manhattan, and I love community—I love to meet people at jury duty, I love to meet people at my kids' recitals, and whatever it is, on the subways—well that's all over. That whole part of life is done, everyone is in their devices, we know. So much so, that I probably jump out of the way seven or eight times on the street now to avoid being bumped into. You know, life is changing, and I'm fascinated by how it's happening and if there's a way to find some well-being in the midst of it.

TS: Okay, now I just want to make sure that everyone's tracking with you when you told this story six or seven years ago when someone said [they] went on a great bike ride and had this special kind of juice, your astonishment was that somebody would think that their personal moment-to-moment, what they're eating and doing would be of interest to lots of other people, that they would take the time to post it? Why did that moment shock you?

NC: It's funny that you should follow up on that, too, because I was sharing that with a Millennial, a person who was about 27, and he had no idea why that experience would have started my book. So, your question, follow up, is perfect. The feeling in that moment was not understanding why, A) she would want to do that—why posting that to a public audience would bring her any kind of sense of validation or meaning. Also, yes, that she could imagine that that would be interesting to anyone, even her mother. [Tami laughs.] There was just bafflement on both fronts.

What we're seeing—I mean it's kind of paradoxical if you really look at it, because on the one hand, we're seeing this incredible kind of narcissism, this incredible kind of everything I do, you know, every cinnamon latte I drink is brilliant. At the same time, that we're—we're designing these "me" rooms where the temperature is our temperature, that the music is our music, and so on, but at the same time, we're experiencing ourselves as a kind of vacuum, so that we don't feel any sense of self-worth unless that is publicly validated.

We're also becoming more and more fearful of spending any time with ourselves. You know, a lot of my clients, they describe that the scariest time of the day is when they're going to bed at night, and after the devices, if they are ever OFF, when they turn off and it's just them there. That feels like a death now. It's an interesting time because you see now people are not processing their own experience inside

themselves.

For example, you might be, I don't know, walking on the street and a woman has a stroller, and you open the door for her, and you have that just sort of that shared sweetness of an act of kindness, and pre- our addiction to technology, we might have walked down the rest of that street and processed that with ourselves. We would have owned it—it becomes kind of a cellular experience, we might change a little bit as a result of it, but it seeps in. But now, what we'll do is, we'll post—immediately, we'll post how #gratitude, #strollersweetness, whatever we put out there. We wait, in a sense, for the meaning of it or what we take from it, now to come into this empty vesicle. So, it's a kind of funny time because it's on the one hand all about us, but on the other hand, there's nothing there.

TS: Mhmm. In your opening comments, you talked about human community is being replaced by this online community, but there's also a gap in the fulfillment of this need we have to connect with each other. Maybe you can say more about that in terms of this sense of our longing for in-person community, and what online community is and isn't delivering.

NC: Well, there are a lot of studies now that show that the less time we spend face-to-face, the more depressed we are. So, there is a reality to this missing component in our lives, and I hear about it all day long. We've sort of been sold this mythology about technology that the more we connect, the more connected we'll feel. That's actually proving to be false, because while our world is on this incredible course of change, the fundamental things we need to feel well and feel grounded, have not changed. They have not changed.

TS: So, what we're seeing is, we grabbed for all the goodies that technology offered, and my experience is that we've reached a tipping point, now, where all the things, you know, are supposed to make life easier, supposed to make life more connected, supposed to make life more free, because of course we're working remote with our Trojan-horse devices. All of these things are now starting to be false, and people are starting to feel that. Right now, we're at a really important point where we're looking at, is it working for us? Is this the way we're using it? The way we're using it—because again, technology is not doing any of this to us. We're using it in a way, from our less evolved self, and is it working for us? We are feeling more disconnected, despite the fact that we're sending, you know, 130 texts a day. We are feeling overwhelmed with the amount of tasks that we have to complete just to keep up with the technology that is supposed to make life easier.

I don't need an app to put on my pants, you know? [Tami laughs.] I just don't need it. I don't need to flush my toilets from the road, that’s fine. [Tami laughs again.] All these things that we can do, right? Do we want to do them? Are they helping? Is it making my life truly freer, or does having my phone in my house that my boss can call me on, mean that I'm available all the time? These are questions really coming to the table now.

TS: Now, you called our smartphones these "Trojan-horse devices," what did you mean by that?

NC: So, once the device gets into your house, it takes over. When young people go to job interviews now, the expectation is that they will be available 24/7. If you're not, then they'll find someone that is. So, the device gets in there under the premise of

making you free, but actually, it's golden handcuffs. Now, we have to be available. When somebody texts you—you know this—the assumption is that you're getting it right then, and you will be answering it right then. So, it's not just our devices that are never off, we're never off. We're never allowing our nervous system to quiet down, to be in silence, to be in quiet, and we need that. The truth is, we need that. It's not just from work that we need that, we actually need spaces where we're not hyper-focused. If people say we're becoming unfocused, I think we're becoming hyper-focused: we're never not focused on something outside of ourselves. In order to let the system rest, we have to be.

TS: Now, you share, in the beginning of The Power of Off, a startling statistic—at least I was startled by it, and here it is, "Most people now check their smartphones every six minutes, or approximately 150 times per day." I was stunned by that.

NC: Yeah, they're statistics saying it's down to every five minutes now, so almost about 190 times per day, yeah.

TS: You talked about how we're in an addiction to technology. You said, in your comments here in this conversation, "Before we became addicted to technology." So, is this an addiction?

NC: Absolutely, yes. I say that, you know, people often ask me the question, "Will our kids grow up to be addicts?" And I laugh, because we're full-on addicts right now. It's considered normal—and it's Korea, but still, it's coming our way—to wear diapers in the gaming club so you don't have to be bothered with your bodily function.

TS: You're kidding me!

NC: No. No, no, no. The average person now, one in three people would give up sex with their partner rather than their smartphones. 50 percent of people would rather give up their sense of smell than their smartphone. So, this is not kidding around stuff.

The only thing though, Tami, I would say, there are a couple fundamental differences about this addiction that makes it, I would say even more challenging to address. First of all, it's more of a like an eating disorder than it is a drinking problem or a drugging problem because, again, we have to find freedom in technology, not from technology. We have to find a handshake here with it; we can't become abstinent, it's really not an option anymore. Even in the cage, they have wifi now.

So, what I would say is different and troublesome about this addiction, is that we've all drunk the Kool-Aid, you know? We're all in. We're in. The other piece is that other addictions take you outside the club—they make you an outsider, you're excluded from normal society. Well as we know, this makes you an insider. The more you can talk about your apps, and talk about your upgrades, and on and on, you're right there at Genius Bar with your sparkly case. [Tami laughs.] This makes you excited. So, this is troublesome because it doesn't have the consequences that most other addictions, I would say all other addictions, have.

TS: Okay, so let's say though, Nancy, someone's listening and they're saying, "Look, I'm not sure I'm an addict. Is there a litmus test to know if I have this—you're comparing it to an eating disorder, do I really have it? How do I know?"

NC: Well, there's some standard questions that we ask about addiction, and I'll go through those, but I would say to that person, it's not so important what label we put on it, it really isn't. What's important is if there is something in you that says, "Hey, you know, I'm just not that convinced that the way I'm relating with technology is working for me, or perhaps, producing a life that at the end of it I'll feel, yeah, that was a really good way to use that life. You know, on Facebook, and Instagram, and Snapchatting, that was good, I'm proud of that. Or, my relationships really benefited from that."

If there's some inkling from you that you want to healthify or moderate your relationship, then you need to look at it. It doesn't matter, but I will say, if you want to know if you're an addict, I would say, is your reliance on technology increasing? Do you experience withdrawal symptoms when you're not able to use? Are you continuing to use technology despite knowing that it's causing impairment in your work, your health, your social or family life? Is your life increasingly revolving around technology? Have you given up activities you used to enjoy, to be able to use technology? Are you lying about your tech use, the amount of it? If one of those is true, it's of concern. If two of those is true, you're probably an addict. If three [are] true, you're definitely an addict. So, ask yourself, if two or three those are the case for you, then you might not even realize what you're giving up in service to your addiction.

TS: Now, the way that I knew that I had an addiction to my smartphone was that, at a red light or at other moments when I'm driving, I would check my smartphone. I tried to do an experiment for a period of time with a friend where for two weeks, neither one of us checked our smartphone at all while driving. Neither one of us could do it. I thought, "Okay, this is it."

What I'd like to understand more, because I know that you've really looked into this, from a neuroscientific perspective, in terms of what's going on in my physiology that says, "I'm stuck in traffic right now, the cars aren't moving, this is a good time for me to see if I've gotten any interesting new emails, or what's happening on my favorite news site." What's happening inside me that I am so wanting and needing to pick up my phone in those moments?

NC: Well, it's a great question. I'm sure that there are neuroscientists that can speak precisely to the chemical release that's happening, but you could look at this way: we all have a kind of reptilian brain and it's the most primal part. Above fear, and survival, there is this kind of—it's like you can think of it as an inner five-year-old, and that five-year-old wants pleasure, wants distraction, wants whatever is immediately going to satisfy the reward center in our brain. So, dopamine—when dopamine is released, which happens with technology, it gets addicted to that release, to that release into the reward center directly. It's not rational in the sense of—it's not like we're going to get anything from that email that is actually important.

It's kind of like a lottery brain—the fact that there's a possibility of something, and it serves our distraction, our great need to check out at the moment, and it serves—it's sort of like it's a hit of pleasure that's coming out of the brain in that moment. It's got some oxytocin going, it's got dopamine, so it's like any addiction; it hits the reward center, even if it's not actually rewarding. It's a complicated process because for time immemorial, we've

been trying to get out of the present moment. We've been trying to not be where we are. [It’s} kind of our wiring, and unless we start to develop a more evolved self, or some awareness, that's our kind of most base instinct: to not be here. That's what you're seeing—that's really what you're seeing when we're checking at the red light.

TS: Now, let's say someone wants to use this pattern that's in their life, this addiction, whether it's to checking their email or to social media, whatever it might be—really as a way to "wake up," to become more present in their life, to observe themselves and to go through a transformation process. How do you recommend somebody approach that?

NC: So, that's the thing. I mean, that's where the optimism is, that's what's so exciting, is that we can take this thing that can seduce us into kind of an entertained sleep—it can really pull us into unconsciousness—and we can flip it, and actually make it a catalyst for awareness. It starts very simply: we start by setting this intention to get curious about our tech use and what's happening inside us. Again, we can't bring judgment into this, because it doesn't help. So we just start out with a kind of attitude of curiosity and, "Wow, what is my relationship with technology?"

From there, what we start to do is we get our inner colander out, kind of our "mind colander," and we start to catch all of the thoughts and all of the times, that we get that impulse: "Oh, I've got 10 minutes, I could shop for shoes, I could go on Zappos, I could get something." We catch it, before we actually type in "Zappos." Or, we have a thought on public transportation, "I could check my email." Catch the thought separate[ly] from actually indulging in the thought. That's the very first, and probably the most, important part of it. We start with an intention: "I want to see if I can get some control here of how I'm using technology. So let me see how many times in an hour, in 10 minutes, I have that impulse." So, that's number one.

Number two is, we start to use technology's impulses as a way of getting to know what's happening where we are. So, the thought comes up, "I've got 10 minutes until the movie, I could make that plane reservation right now." Well, what would I feel, what would I have to feel, if I didn't do that right now? If I just stayed with myself in sort of this open space, I don't have anything to do, right? What would I have to feel? Or, what am I feeling right in this moment that's actually causing me to want to distract myself? What's this moment like? Again, the impulses, rather than diving into them—or not even diving into them, actually being collapsed into them, so we just act them out as soon as they arrive—they become these pointers to say, "Oh wait, what's happening right here that that appeared?" Then we've radically changed—then we welcome them, because, "Oh, right, wow, what's happening here that I want to go there?"

TS: What would be your picture, if you will, if you were to draw one, of a life in which our relationship to technology is healthy and balanced? I mean, you gave the example of eating disorders, and someone could certainly describe what a healthy relationship with food might be like. What would be a healthy relationship with technology? What would that look like in your view?

NC: My sense is that, that's going to be an individual, case-by-case, answer. So, for example, for myself, I knew that email was a problem for me. So for me, it's never—once an addict, always an addict, I would say to some degree. So what it means is that, I stay fiercely mindful of how often I check. So I allow myself to check in the

morning, and I allow myself to check once in the afternoon, and then in the evening. The craving for it certainly has changed, but that I am making choices about how I want to live my life.

At the same time, when I'm in my car, I'm using the GPS because I don't have any sense of direction. When I am at my daughter's concert, I am not using the phone, I am actually directly experiencing that. When I'm walking on that country road, I am feeling that breeze. What makes, to my mind—and it's a great question—a healthy relationship with technology is that it's allowing you to directly experience your life. It's not in the way of that, because I think if we really boil down what's most insidious about this addiction is that, you know, there's all this talk about mindfulness and it’s the buzz, but—not even and, but—the way we're living our lives is actually kidnapped from the present moment.

If we're not staring at the device itself, so that we're not tasting the apple, we're not feeling the breeze, we're not in the conversation with the friend, we're actually completely distracted from it; if we're not doing that, then we're at the art museum, taking selfies of ourselves looking at art, so that we can post them as a cultural person, who goes to the museum, and build our brand, right? So we're not in the experience. And if we're not doing that, we're at the concert, photographing the concert, videotaping it, so later, we can show our friends, "Look, I was at the concert." I've got 64GB of iPhoto memory, but I've got no lived experience, I’ve got no direct experience of life.

So a healthy relationship, the balance is on being present, actually experiencing your life as you're living it. Then, using technology as a tool for whatever it's helpful for. If it's taking a screenshot of something so you can send it to your carpenter so he can measure the floor module there, great, it's super helpful. But that you, for yourself, are deciding, "I'm in my life as it's happening." That, to me, is the key. You have to decide that. Every person has to decide what that means for them.

TS: Now, you said that you yourself were an email addict, and said that, once an addict always an addict, you now check your email, you know, on a whole, morning, afternoon, and evening, instead of 10 times an hour, but that you had to work with that craving, and that it changed over time. So tell me, how did you work with the craving, and how did it change?

NC: So, I set an intention. You know, one day I walked into my house, and I walked past my kids, and I think I said a perfunctory hello, and I went running to my email. It's not like I'm expecting something from Obama, you know? [Tami laughs.] There's nothing coming in that's important. But I had an awakening in that moment—maybe it was a look in my daughter's eyes, that this is just not okay with me. It's just not okay. We have to get to that place inside ourselves where something is askew here—what is primarily important to me in my life is not in alignment with what I'm paying attention to and where I'm putting my time and energy. Where we put our time and energy is what we're saying matters. These two are out of alignment.

I'm pretty disciplined, so I just decided, I think that it's unreasonable to be checking every half an hour, and for me, it feels balanced around each meal to kind of see what's happening. That feels, for me—and sometimes I don't need the lunch check, but it's not like I'm saying I don't still feel that, "Ooh, I could check. Maybe something interesting's come in," or what have you. But for me, that

feels like enough, I get enough of a hit from that. Gradually, over time, my allegiance changed to what is really important to me. And I know that for me, I need to do it those few times in order to support what's important in my life. It's really a conscious decision that, while I would love to check 512 times a day, that is not supporting what really nourishes me, which is to be present in my life and not thinking about what might have come in.

TS: Now, you mentioned, Nancy, your children—walking past your kids, the wake-up moment, and realizing you were rushing to check your email instead of relating. I think a big question for any parent is health technology use within the family, and I'm wondering what you've discovered about that in terms of best practices, especially with children at different ages, and what you would recommend to parents who are trying to navigate this.

NC: Well, I offer a big hug to all of us. That's what I say. A big, compassion-filled—this is just really tough stuff. This is no kidding around tough stuff, and the dialogue is happening now. We are learning what works. We are trying, all of us, to figure out how to create a health family environment with generations that have never known anything different. One thing that I've noticed with my little one is that, when she was allowed to start swiping, and start playing on her sister's phone—because I have a teenager as well—when that started to happen, within one week, Tami, her imaginative play stopped. Within one week. She stopped turning the toilet paper into a Barbie, and all of that creative stuff that her mind just generated, stopped, and she just wanted to get on. So I saw it so first-hand, and of course, then I just stopped access, I just cut the access.

But I see the power that this technology has to interrupt our self-generative spirit, whatever that is—our ability to not be passive learners, not do what the app tells us to do but to actually create. So, that's the first thing I would say is just that this is powerful stuff, and we really have to be respectful of the power of this. One thing that I'm working on with my teenager, because I call this an addiction in part because trying to get her to put her device down, it's no different—I've worked in lots of different facilities as a therapist, and it's no different than an addict. The rage that comes up and the agitation, and this is like getting a crack addict off their crack.

What I have really been working with her—first of all, just having to be fierce, just having to say there are times in the day and there are times in the summer where, you know you take a month off, where you just have to say no. You just have to say no. It's not easy, and it's not a pleasant process. These kids—their academic life, their social life, their logistical life, every aspect of their life takes place on that technology, so they feel they're being cut off from their life source when you remove that. Here's what I'm trying to do—and it's an experiment, I'm being honest with you, I have no clear-cut answers here, the evidence is coming in—but is to keep our children conscious of how they feel when they're using as much as their using.

So that means that when my daughter takes July off, I make a lot of effort to have her notice the difference in how that feels, when she's with kids that are not texting, and Snapchatting, and Instagramming while they're with her. How does that feel? How does it feel when you don't have to check your phone every three-and-a-half minutes? Do you feel calmer? So, what frightens me is the day where that sense of agitation, and disconnection, and alienation, and anxiety becomes the norm. I still have her very much conscious that when she comes home from a friend's house where they turned off the technology, she says, "Wow, it really felt like I was with that friend."

That's the best that we have right now is to keep them conscious of the difference between what that feels like and it feels like to be [with] a friend who, while you're on the date with them, is on their phone the whole time.

TS: I want to break it down a little bit further, because you mentioned that you have a teenager but also a younger child as well. In the beginning of a child's life, do you think there's a period of time—and up until what age when perhaps, having no access to technology—I don't know if you would include television and the idea that sometimes people use technology as a babysitter; you know, "Watch this YouTube clip, or watch this movie," so what do you think the very beginning of life, and then how much technology as a child ages do you think is reasonable?

NC: Well, the American Pediatric Association has said no technology before two. I would say bump that up to four. I just don't think that they need—television has a different effect on children, it just has a different effect. They can't take it with them everywhere, and it's not that addictive interactive stuff that makes them so wild for it. I would say there's no reason for a child to be on the phone when they're under the age of four; there's just no reason.

What I will say though, however, is that I don't want to judge any parent. You know, sometimes a parent just needs a break, just needs a break. In the past, we would put that child in front of TV—well, so right now we'd hand her the iPad, and you know what? That's fine. That's completely fine. This is not black and white. Sometimes, what the parent needs is really what needs to be honored.

What I would say is, it takes a long-range approach. We need to think about, a child should not have—when your child is starting to do homework, right? The child who turns five or six, maybe the child gets a half an hour of playtime with learning apps for every day—half an hour, twenty minutes, something like that, because we can't keep this from the child. The more we turn it into kind of, again, something that is prohibited, the more wanted it's going to be. So, we're trying to build a kind of normal, healthy relationship with this. What can it teach you? What are the good parts of technology?

As a child goes into their tweens and teens, and they're doing some homework and that kind of thing, the phone has to be removed from them when they're doing anything that requires their focused attention. That's part of the problem. It's not ADD—we're not creating ADD, but we're creating a situation where these kids are multi-tasking at such a level that they're actually not able to do the work that they need to do. So the phone has to be removed when anything is being done like homework, or anything required like that. Turning off the notifications, turning off all the rings and chimes, and just staying with one device, the computer. I would say that is absolutely critical.

The other thing is to really have a family conversation about this. This has to be the family problem, and there has to be a meeting—many, many meetings, as we have done in our family—about how is this impacting us? The fact that we're screaming all the time about this, are we okay with that? In service to family community, in service to the peace of the family, this has to be limited, the time.

Our daughter gets a couple hours at night after the homework is done, and things like this that are reasonable, but they've been hard-fought, violently fought for. So, we're no different than any other family. It's just the commitment to a kind of family

environment; it has to be rigorous. It just has to be rigorous, there are no easy answers on this one.

TS: Now, in your book, Nancy, The Power of Off: The Mindful Way to Stay Sane in a Virtual World, I thought some of the most interesting sections came in the final third of the book where you're really looking at how we can connect to awareness and not be so identified with our thinking mind, and how our increased use of technology actually increases the activity and identification with our thinking mind.

I'm going to read this one quote from the book, because I really liked it. Here's what you write. You write, "In the Buddhist tradition, there's a saying that the mind is like a wild monkey that's locked in a cage, drunk a bottle of wine, and been stung by a bee. If that's what the mind was like before technology, then on technology, the mind is a wild, locked-up monkey that's drunk two bottles of wine chased by a shot of scotch, and been stung by a whole swarm of bees." So, I wonder if you can just talk a little bit about how is it that our use of technology has made our monkey-minds more crazy monkey?

NC: [Laughs.] Well, any of us who use technology know that the feeling when we've used technology is that our mind is amped up, right? It's been fed. The food of the mind is information, entertainment, stuff. Stuff that the mind can fix, and problems the mind can solve, and contents. Contents, not context, contents, and these are the munchies for the mind.

So, technology steps in, and I think this is really one of the biggest problems that we're facing, is that technology enthrones the mind, it makes it master of our universe, which is what it wants. So we give the mind data, we give the mind travel plans, all this stuff to do—the mind likes to do, and technology is all about doing. It's not about being. Being, in a certain sense, is the enemy, it's what's feared. It's the cessation of the doing.

Technology feeds, again, our brand, our identity, who are you? Who are you? Are you the kind of person that—? It's like amphetamine for our identity—not just on social media, but in a generalized sense, we're always announcing who we are, who we are, this small self, this ego self, if you will. So, we're feeding that more and more, and this technology-soaked mind is telling us what we need to live a satisfying, and good, and nourishing life, and it's just the wrong source. It doesn't have the wisdom of the heart, or the gut, or the soul, whatever you call it.

So, part of what I work with people on is, again, finding a way back to the place of stillness inside ourselves, because ultimately we can't have any kind of abiding well-being, or any kind of grounded calm if we're always trying to outrun ourselves—outrun being. Right? Because we're just chasing yet another thing, another thing, another Wikipedia page, another app, another whatever game we've got going on. And the feeling underneath it is, "If I stop, if I just sit in the quiet, or meet myself without supplementation, then I'll cease to exist."

That's what the mind tells us—it tells us, "If it's not me, the mind, you don't exist." When you do practice, part of what you discover, blessedly, is that under all the doing, and under all of the hats that we wear—I'm a "this," I'm a "that," or whatever it is—is this presence that is reliable, that is there. It is there, it will catch you—grace will catch you—but we can't know it if we're just filling it up with more stuff and more data, and more fear that if we stop, we'll die.

TS: Have you made it a practice, and do you suggest that people try things like leaving their smartphone at home when they go for a walk, or things like that? What do you find works for people? Those kinds of suggestions.

NC: Yes. So in the detox, I talk about some of these things that you can do. You don't have to do the detox to do some of these—

TS: This is a section at the end of the book, a digital detox program that you offer. People might not be familiar with that, but at the end, you offer a 30-day detox, but you can share with us what some of the essential practices are, regardless of whether you go through the whole 30 days.

NC: Absolutely. It's absolutely not mandatory to go through the 30 days. One of the things that I suggest is just what you just said, is every day, to do something—wander like a happy dog, go somewhere and don't bring your phone. Remember what it feels like to not have the device in your hand. It's important not just that it be in your bag, not that you're not holding it on the street, but actually do something that is totally separate from that so you re-experience yourself; and maybe some silence.

Another thing that I suggest that people do is, first half hour of the day, they don't use. It's very hard for many people to do this one, so then if it's impossible, try 15 minutes. In that time, [try] to do some kind of anything that connects you with your body—because one of the things, as we become more and more identified with mind, is we become really disembodied, like little heads walking around. Where our attention is, is who we are. If it's in this app, if it's in this game, if it's in whatever it is, we don't feel our bodies all the way down to the ground.

So maybe it's just that you do some stretching in the morning, or maybe you do a body scan, or you do some yoga, or what-have-you, before you bump up into the mind and spend the rest of your day outrunning yourself, basically, into the world of content. Find the place in your body that is just presence, and in that 15 or 30 minutes, whatever you can manage, try and set some kind of intention for what is important to me today—the life that I live today, what do I want it to express? Maybe there's a word: maybe it's kindness, maybe it's excitement, whatever it is, but make it a kind of conscious process of what kind of day do I want to make happen, today?

Similarly, at the end of the day, try and not be on technology the last hour, if it's possible. That's not just powerful for sleep—I mean, there's tons of research about how that impacts sleep, but it's also important about closing the day with some sense of, again, naming what is important to me and what kind of life I want to live, and processing the day, and kind of going through what was important. You don't have to do it the whole hour—just five minutes—but actually not being up in the head the last hour of the day, come back down below the shoulders at the end of the day, as well. Like parenthesis.

Some of these, and some very basic ones: just don't use while you're eating, taste the food. Just do one thing at a time; if you're taking a walk in nature, turn off the phone, turn off the phone all together and put it away. If you are sitting at a meal with a friend, or having a drink with a friend, don't put the phone in-between the two of you; put it out of sight. These sort of little behaviors make such a difference. If you're ordering a coffee from the deli man, don't be texting while you're actually doing that. Little things to start paying attention to what's happening right

here, right now.

TS: You know, you mentioned not having the phone out on the table when you're with a friend. In the book, you talk about how there are actual studies related to this about how, just even the appearance of the smartphone on the table, affects people during their conversation over a meal. Can you talk about that? How does that affect us? Because I've noticed that. Yes.

NC: Absolutely, and we've all lived it; we don't have to even go to studies, But the studies show, conclusively, that the level of intimacy that people experience when the phone is on the table, is decreased. How they report the conversation afterward is that it was less close, that they felt less nourished by it. Just by having the phone—it doesn't even have to go off, it doesn't have to ring. So, what I would say is that, you know, again, do we want to be mindful? Do we want to live conscious lives? What are you saying, right there, by putting the phone there?

What you're saying, really, is you're not enough. You're not enough, to that friend sitting right in front of you, you're saying something else might come in. Something maybe better, something more interesting—something about just us is not enough. That message is very, very subtle, but people are very sensitive to that.

It also prevents you from really landing. You know we all know this, something really magical happens when two people really show up and are present with each other, without distractions, and that can't happen. With just the threat of something coming in—just the promise, I guess you could say, of something coming in, we can't really land with each other, really arrive. The mystery in that sort of surprise and spontaneity that is human contact, that happens when two people are really with—and I mean that sort of capital "With" each other—can't happen because it's being controlled by the device promising something else.

You know, I've had friends, I've had conversations with friends—very recently I had a conversation with a friend, who in our conversation, took about five or six texts during it, and it's a dear friend. It's important, I think, to be honest about that. "You know, if we're going to be together, I would really prefer you turn off your phone," because chances are that person also wishes that were the case, so somebody has to voice, "This is not okay with me. This doesn't feel like we're together."

TS: I could imagine that would take a certain kind of bravery, I would imagine, in certain relationships to bring that forward.

NC: Absolutely. And yet, and yet, what we all really crave is the full attention of another human being. It is so primal. The sad thing about all of this is that, while we're pretending it's all fine—because wherever we are, we're mostly having conversations with someone who's not in the room. You go to a party these days of millennials and they're all having conversation, but with no one in the room. [We all pretend] that this is okay, and yet nobody—if you talk to people privately, nobody is really okay with that.

So, what's happened is that it's become a kind of social awkwardness tool, so that when you don't have anyone to talk to, or you don't know what to do with yourself—in the past, we'd have to figure that out, we'd have to do something about that, but now we don't. We just pretend we're swiping.

I have to say, at times, it's incredibly—part of what makes technology so complicated is that it's both. I appreciate—at some of these parents gatherings, I just pretend I'm on the phone, because I also, at times, just don't want to chit-chat, so it serves that purpose of getting us out of here. But what we really crave at the end of the day, is this presence. It's not happening. Just by putting the phone down, we're saying something about this relationship.

What I'm seeing with young people, too, is that—it's very interesting, but in the dating world, they're creating this kind of avatars, these fabulous characters that text and always have something phenomenal to say, and as soon as they're not fabulous, they just drop out of the text. But then when they try and build the relationship that started through these avatars, it's like they're playing emotional catch-up. They're not that person yet, and the relationship has skipped 100 steps.

So we're creating these sort of virtual characters that are in a relationship—texting all this sexy stuff, we're flirting, we're doing that, but the relationship is nowhere near that. Then there's this expectation, right? That the relationship and our relationships should always be fun, should always be fabulous—they don't have any of the awkwardness, they don't have the bumps, and if they do, we're more inclined now to just drop out of them.

TS: You know, you're talking, Nancy, about how a younger generation are creating avatars online, and how that affects their relationships, and you share another really interesting observation in The Power of Off about young people; how you used to ask people, "What is your dream for what you want to be when you grow up?," and you can share what kinds of answers you're getting today that are different. I thought that was a very curious part of the book.

NC: Well, when I used to ask, "What do you see for you life," or that sort of thing, I would often get, "I want to play music," or, "I want to help people as a doctor," or travel, but it was experience-based. It had to do with how we were going to live, essentially. What I hear now is, "I want to be a brand emperor," or, "I want to be famous,"—just plain old, "I want to be famous." Of course, when you ask, "Famous for what?," they really look at you cockeyed, like they don't quite understand what that has to do with it.

What I'm seeing is—again, we were talking about identity a moment ago—that while it used to be that we lived a certain life because we had certain interests or what-have-you, and then as an organic result of that we were known as that kind of person, so it was sort of [from the] inside out.

Now what's happened is, it's flipped; so we decided what do we want to be known as, and then we go about building a life that will create that. So, it's very spooky in that way, that what we're seeing is that who we are seen as seems to be replacing what kind of life we want to live. At the same, we're seeing a profound value change, I think, in our culture, where things like mastery, things like experience, and wisdom, and all of those sort of old-school things, are being replaced by fame. They're really being replaced by who's most popular. That is what we value right now in 2016.

The fact that a kid who's, you know, 15 and can do splits on Vine, or one of these short-video channels—he's idealized, right? This has become what our culture, what it supports. It's a very strange time because all those things like craftsmanship, like really knowing your work or the brilliance that comes out of thousands of hours in the

saddle, if you will—you know, these things are not that important, they're not that valued.

So, of course these kids are saying, "I want to be a brand emperor," or, "I want to be Jay-Z," or what-have-you, because that's what we think is important now. Again, our values, they're going to probably take—my sense is, it'll be like this for some time until the emptiness of that sort of switches it again.

TS: Nancy, as we come to a conclusion, do you think it's fair to say that in your view, you feel that we're at a crisis juncture in our relationship with technology? That the reason you're so passionate about this is because we're really in danger, or am I overstating it?

NC: I think we are—I actually feel quite optimistic, is the truth. I have great faith in each person making an individual choice for themselves about whether this is working.

What I think is that we have been on a course towards sleep; we have been going under anesthesia, and that has worked, for a lot of people. That has been what a lot of people want. At the same time, the difficulty that technology is creating in the agitation and the difficulty completing all the tasks, and the overwhelm, it's giving a run for the money for the part of us that's falling asleep.

Like, we'll fall asleep; I do feel human nature will fall asleep, but it's so agitating, and it's so difficult to live the way we're living, that I think people are waking up to, "I don't want to live this way anymore. I don't want to miss my life. I don't want to miss my friends' lives, I don't want to miss my kids' lives, I don't want to have to lock my phone in the car so I don't use it. I don't want to live like an addict."

So, I think we're at this great tipping point where each one of us can make a choice for ourselves, moment to moment. We don't need a collective decision here; moment to moment, as you decided not to use your phone at the red light, there it is, right there. If there are a thousand points of those [red lights] happening, then we're starting to change. I really do feel that the discomfort of this way of living, and the awareness of how emptying it is and how disconnected it makes us feel, and all of that, is making people want to change their behavior.

TS: Then, just one final question for you. This show is called Insights at the Edge, and I'm always curious to know what someone's "edge" is, kind of their growing edge in their life—the challenge that they're currently working with, if you will. I'm curious, in terms of you and technology, and The Power of Off, what would you say is your current edge?

NC: I think the edge that I experience is the edge that I was speaking of a few minutes ago, about really getting comfortable and tolerating the open space without—the unfilled time without filling it in. So, even more than email for me, is—I love to learn, I'm very curious, and in spaces where there is no object of attention, to just hang out there and not do because I can, and not fill it with something interesting, but to get even more comfortable, I would say, with that just pure, spacious awareness of the desire to learn, to fill, to engage in that moment, and not act on it. To be present without an object of my attention. That's what I would say is really where I work.

TS: Very good, very helpful.

I've been speaking with Nancy Colier, she's the author of a new book called The Power of Off: The Mindful Way to Stay Sane in a Virtual World. Thank you so much. You've inspired me, and I think you've inspired our listeners to me more on the side of wakefulness in their relationship with technology and their devices. Thank you so much.

NC: Thank you. Thanks for having me.

TS: SoundsTrue.com: many voices, one journey. Thanks for listening.

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