

Technofasting Illich: Wisdom for Our Age of Techno-tantalizationⁱ

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Sir Thomas Crapper's mass-produced technology—the flush toilet—reminds us that our technologies often conceal more than they reveal.

As Madhu Suri Prakash has illustrated, considering technology's wonders—post Hiroshima, post *Silent Spring*, post Katrina, post Frankenfood—ought at least to include notice of the ways technology functions to distract our attention, and even diminish the possibilities for paying attention in important ways.

In *Tools for Conviviality*, Illich wrote:

Counterfoil research must clarify and dramatize the relationship of people to their tools. It ought to hold constantly before the public the resources that are available and the consequences of their use in various ways. It should impress on people the existence of any trend that threatens one of the major balances on which life depends. (Illich, 1973/2000, p. 83)

“Technofasting”—the concept and the challenge—dramatizes questions about the relationship between people and tools. Technofasting goes way back. Well before Illich, the New England prophet, Henry David Thoreau, age 28, said it best: “But lo! men have become the tools of their tools” (Thoreau, 1947, p. 292). Or maybe it was Robert Oppenheimer, father of the A bomb, who in 1945 when the first nuke exploded recalled the *Bhagavad-Gita*: “Now I am become Death, the destroyer of worlds” (Oppenheimer cited in Hijiya, 2000, p. 123).

The hunter carried his spear. That I am a tool of my tools--I feel this acutely as I rush off for a conference I am shoehorning, like so much else, into a work/life schedule too scattered and too full for the slower, deeper pace of living and working I yearn for, but somehow remains out of reach. My back is bent to my tools, and they shape me into their likeness. Worldwide, work station illnesses proliferate.

“Lo”--a Middle English word that means “look, see, behold.” As in “lo and behold.” Lo! we have become the tools of our tools.

To say so today against the background of our wired hyper-connectivity is almost trivial in its obviousness. When asked what their father does for a living, my kids respond, “email.” They crave their handheld devices like candy, and huddle with friends like smokers around lit screens. About their father’s occupation—they are merely being observant.

Technofasting: A fast is a cleanse, not a rejection of food. In wisdom traditions, fasting is purification for the sake of improving one’s powers of discernment. It makes eating more enjoyable and healthier; it lowers your blood pressure and aids your digestion. Technofasting is no rejection of technology, but a purge of dependence on select tools for the sake of improving one’s powers of sensory, cognitive, and intuitive discernment. It helps me to recover from overdose and renew other modes of perception. Yet, few of us practice fasting of any kind. It sounds like a good idea, but who has the time or the will? How else might we slow down and unplug enough to examine the relation of people to the tools we take for granted, tools that we may not even recognize as tools, tools that we may have become: *homo technologicus*.

Well before Instagram and other technologies of “real time” connectivity, Thoreau wondered, “Why should we live in such a hurry and waste of life?” (Thoreau, 1947, p. 346). He was mighty suspicious of cultures of speed, of the railroad and the telegraph—mobility and

communications revolutions that prefigure our own. “We do not ride on the railroad;” Thoreau writes, “it rides upon us....If some have the pleasure of riding on a rail, others have the misfortune of being ridden upon” (Thoreau, 1947, p. 345). The civilly disobedient argument is not against technology, but for acknowledging its costs to self and others, human and more-than-human. What are the costs? They are uncounted, unaccounted for, and perhaps uncountable. They are on an evolutionary scale. On communications technologies, Thoreau opines:

Our inventions are wont to be pretty toys, which distract our attention from serious things. They are but improved means to an unimproved end, an end which it was already but too easy to arrive at.... We are in great haste to construct a magnetic telegraph from Maine to Texas; but Maine and Texas, it may be, have nothing important to communicate. (Thoreau, 1947, pp. 306-307)

What, after all, in our revolving culture of upgrade, productivity, exploitation, speed, and waste, do we have to say to one another? And is anyone ready to listen?

Technofasting is no rejection of technology, but an antidote to its opposite: technotantalization, which numbs and distracts us from considering purposes and discerning outcomes, outcomes such as our own experience and the trajectory of the human race. Let poetry stand in for PowerPoint. In “Song of Myself” Walt Whitman, a contemporary of Thoreau but decidedly a New Yorker of his time, exclaims, “I swear I will never mention love or death inside a house!”ⁱⁱ Houses and shuttered rooms—even these technologies over-restrict the poet’s mad desire for contact--to touch the kosmos and embrace his friends. “Dear Comerado, I confess I have urged you onward with me, and still urge you.” “No friend of mine takes his ease in my chair,” the poet writes, “I have no chair.” Whitman continually models a movement away from what constrains,

and toward “the mystical moist” stuff of an enfleshed life in contact with the open air and in the company of friends. What on the Internet substitutes for a touch? Or for eyes openly holding one another? “I am mad for it to be in contact with me” says Whitman. Poets often bring us, through language, image, metaphor and narrative, back to our senses. Poets and other artists offer tools that help us to reset our perception and experience; in this way art offers us an antidote to the prescriptions and constrictions of experience endemic to industrial tools.

The medium is the message. In his poem “How To Be a Poet,” Wendell Berry puts it plainly: “stay away from screens./Stay away from anything/that obscures the place it is in” (Berry, 2015). The screen—what it feeds and what it costs—dominates our attention. It is still early years, and no turning back in the short run. Like with climate change, there are only possibilities for mitigation and adaptation. Technofasting is a form of mitigation. It can create space for a touch more responsive than touchscreens. It can help reveal *how* we pay attention and *what* we pay attention to. It can lift the veil on the costs of our tools. It can help us reacquaint our selves with our selves, and with the place we are in. Technofasting can help us sort out the difference between means and ends and help us choose what tools to embrace for what purpose.

In *Tools for Conviviality* Illich describes two watershed periods in a society’s uptake of tools. The first watershed is where the tool serves a need and shows real potential for solving problems; the second is where the use of the tool becomes counterproductive and part of a radical monopoly that controls how the tool is used. Illich’s conception of tools is of course expansive and inclusive of most industrial institutions. He describes the second watershed as the point at which “the progress demonstrated in a previous achievement is used as a rationale for the exploitation of society as a whole... by an element of society, by one of its self-certifying professional élites” (Illich, 1973/2000, p. 7). Do we, as Illich claimed, continue to expect more

from technologies and less from ourselves and from each other? Wendell Berry replies, “Stay away from screens.”

So many “technologies of the self” surround our existence; the need for a fast seems obvious; the treadmill of production keeps increasing speed. How do we respond to cultures—to our selves—hooked on progress and binging on its glitzy tools? In response, Thoreau, Whitman, Gandhi, Illich, Berry—and many others—suggest a deliberate politics of refusal. Always embedded in this refusal is an embrace of something too precious to give away. Technofasting is likewise a twin act of refusal and embrace; not a step backward to some fake golden age, but forward into what might be still be revealed. It is an experiment one must attempt for oneself.

Can I slow down enough to fast? Am I strong enough to refuse in order to embrace? To open myself to unaccountable experience while I can still sense something else available? Let the poets have the last word. Walt Whitman:

Hurrah for positive science! Long live exact demonstration!
Gentlemen I receive you, and attach and clasp hands with you,
The facts are useful and real . . . they are not my dwelling . . . I enter by them to an
area of the dwelling.
I am less the reminder of property or qualities, and more the reminder of life,
And go to the square for my sake and for other's sake,
And make short account of neuters and geldings, and favor men and women fully
equipped,
And beat the gong of revolt and stop with fugitives and them that plot and conspire.

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ⁱ This paper was part two of a session given at AERA in Philadelphia in 2014 titled "Technofasting Illich: Wisdom for Our Age of Techno-Tantalization." In part one of the session, Madhu Suri Prakash explored the history of the flush toilet, championed in the 19th century by industrialist Sir Thomas Crapper.

ⁱⁱ All citations of Walt Whitman are from the 1855 edition of *Leaves of Grass* accessed September 4, 2014 from <http://www.whitmanarchive.org/published/LG/1855/whole.html>.