

Don't Let the Screen Strangle Your Soul, Part 2

Let me suggest three ways in which the digital revolution, for all its benefits, is also an accomplice to our experience of being hassled, frazzled, and crazy busy. For if we understand the threats, we may have some hope of finding a way forward. In [Part 1](#) of this post, I talked about the first, addiction.

Second, there is the threat of acedia. Acedia is an old word roughly equivalent to “sloth” or “listlessness.” It is not a synonym for leisure, or even laziness. Acedia suggests indifference and spiritual forgetfulness. It’s like the dark night of the soul, but more blah, more vanilla, less interesting. As Richard John Neuhaus explains, “Acedia is evenings without number obliterated by television, evenings neither of entertainment nor of education but of narcotized defense against time and duty. Above all, acedia is apathy, the refusal to engage the pathos of other lives and of God’s life with them” (Freedom for Ministry, 227).

For too many of us, the hustle and bustle of electronic activity is a sad expression of a deeper acedia. We feel busy, but not with a hobby or recreation or play. **We are busy with busyness.** Rather than figure out what to do with our spare minutes and hours, we are content to swim in the shallows and pass our time with passing the time. How many of us, growing too accustomed to the acedia of our age, feel this strange mix of busyness and lifelessness? We are always engaged with our thumbs, but rarely engaged with our thoughts. We keep downloading information, but rarely get down into the depths of our hearts. That’s acedia—purposelessness disguised as constant commotion.

All of this leads directly to the third threat of our digital world and that’s the danger that we are never alone. When I say “never alone,” I’m not talking about Big Brother watching over us or the threat of security breaches. I’m talking about *our* desire to never be alone. Peter Kreeft is right: “We *want* to complexify our lives. We don’t have to, we *want* to. We wanted to be harried and hassled and busy. Unconsciously, we want the very things we complain about. For if we had leisure, we would look at ourselves and listen to our hearts and see the great gaping hole in our hearts and be terrified, because that hole is so big that nothing but God can fill it.” (Christianity for Modern Pagans, 168).

Sometimes I wonder if I’m so busy because I’ve come to believe the lie that busyness is the point. And nothing allows us to be busy—all the time, with anyone anywhere—like having the whole world in a little black rectangle in your pocket. In *Hamlet’s Blackberry*, William Powers likens our digital age to a gigantic room. In the room are more than a billion people. But despite its size, everyone is in close proximity to everyone else. At any moment someone may come up and tap you on the shoulder—a text, a hit, a comment, a tweet, a post, a message, a new thread. Some people come up to talk business, others to complain, others to tell secrets, others to flirt, others to sell you things, others to give you information, others just to tell you what they’re thinking or doing. This goes on day and night. Powers calls it a “non-stop festival of human interaction” (xii).

We enjoy the room immensely—for awhile. But eventually we grow tired of the constant noise.

We struggle to find a personal zone. Someone taps us while we're eating, while we're sleeping, while we're on a date. We even get tapped in the bathroom for crying out loud. So we decide to take a digital vacation, just a short one. But no one else seems to know where the exit is. No one else seems interested in leaving. In fact, they all seem put off that you might not want to stay. And even when you find the exit and see the enchanting world through the opening, you aren't sure what life will be like on the other side. It's a leap of faith to jump out and see what happens.

The point of Power's parable should be self-evident. Like Tolkien's ring, we love the room and hate the room. We want to breathe the undistracted air of digital independence, but increasingly the Room is all we know. How can we walk out when everyone else is staying in? How will we pass our time and occupy our thoughts with the unceasing tap, tap, tap? For many of us, the Web is like the Eagles' *Hotel California*: we can check out anytime we like, but we can never leave.

And the scariest part is that we may not *want* to leave. **What if we prefer endless noise to the deafening sound of silence?** What if we do not care to hear God's still, small voice? What if the trivialities and distractions of our day are not forced upon us by busyness, or forced upon us at all? What if we choose to be busy so that we can continue to live with trivia and distraction? If "digital busyness is the enemy of depth" (17) then we are bound to be stuck in the shallows so long as we're never alone. Our digital age gives new relevance to Pascal's famous line: "I have often said that the sole cause of man's unhappiness is that he does not know how to stay quietly in his room."

Or stay out of the room, as the case may be.

Read more from Kevin [here](#).