Luke Fernandez

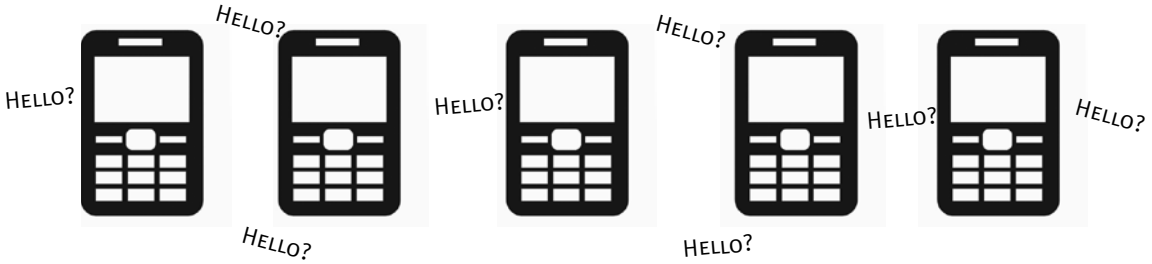
Sanctuaries for the Mind in A Digital Age

A Conversation with William Powers

PRELUDE

William Powers is the author of The New York Times *bestseller* Hamlet's BlackBerry: Building a Good Life In the Digital Age. *Part practical philosophy, and part history, Powers delves into the age-old instinct for connection, the technologies that facilitate this connection, and how to manage that connectivity more mindfully. The struggle to balance our individual selves and our more connected social selves is not particular to our own age but was anticipated by famous thinkers from our past including Plato, Seneca and Thoreau. After examining how these thinkers confronted the problem of connectivity, he uses them to lend insight into our own very real connectivity problems in the 21st century.*

Prior to writing Hamlet's BlackBerry, *Powers worked at the* Washington Post *and was also a columnist for* National Journal *and* The New Republic. *His writings have appeared in* The Atlantic, The New York Times, *and many other publications. Powers was invited to campus because faculty and students have been worried about the connectivity question at Weber State as well. Contemporaneous with Powers' visit, Weber State offered an interdisciplinary class titled "Concentration in the Humanities," sponsored by an NEH Digital Humanities grant. That class explored similar questions: How can we concentrate and learn effectively when we seem to be more and more distracted by our digital devices? Might it be appropriate to construct so-called Walden zones (a term that Powers himself had coined) as a respite from the ever-accelerating deluge of information that comes in over our ever more ubiquitous digital networks? The following interview examined some of these shared concerns.*



CONVERSATION

Was there a specific event in your personal life that opened your eyes to what technology is doing to society? I think you mention a few of these in the opening chapters of your book Hamlet's BlackBerry*?*

There were a number of different events. I chose three signal moments to talk about in the book and they still are very powerful for me. One was falling out of my boat and having my cell phone fall into the water and realizing that I was completely disconnected for the first time. At that moment it dawned on me, a) that that was a very special place to be, the disconnected state, and it had value; and b) that I hadn't been there in a long time and I didn't know why. That happened when I was working on the essay I wrote as a fellow at Harvard, also called "Hamlet's BlackBerry," which preceded the book.

Number two was what I call "the vanishing family trick." This refers to a ritual my family

had of gathering in the living room after dinner, for conversation and just simple time together. The more connected we got digitally, the harder it was for us to stay in that room. We would each (there are three of us, my wife, my son and me) slip off to our separate corners of the house to commune with our screens. As this happened more and more, I found myself shaking my head at bedtime, wondering where did the evening go? We haven't even talked to each other. So that was number two, more of a family-life thing.

Number three was also personal, but in a different way. It was the phone call with my mother, which I talk about in one of the early chapters called "Hello, Mother." That also happened when I was at Harvard working on the essay. One day, while driving down the highway, I called my mother. We chatted briefly about a few things and hung up. And the real connectedness happened, weirdly enough, after I got off the phone. I recount this kind of mental journey I went on, into my relationship with my Mom, as I drove along. It was about my memories and associations and all kinds of rich thoughts about that relationship. Now, the funny thing about that moment was that it had been enabled by a digital device, but the real depth and beauty of it came when I put the device away and allowed my thoughts to float free. Rather than moving on to another phone-centric task, as we tend to do, I allowed a gap to open up between me and my digital life. These gaps have become quite rare, and so that experience became a metaphor for the puzzle I was hoping to solve in the book. It's not as simple as digital devices are good or bad. They're full of potential, good potential, but it can turn into bad potential if you use them unwisely and start eliminating the gaps. And so I wanted to thread that needle. How can we live wisely and happily with these gadgets? How can we preserve those all-important gaps?

All of these moments together kind of shaped my thinking as I embarked on the book.

The real connectedness happened, weirdly enough, after I got off the phone. I recount this kind of mental journey I went on, into my relationship with my Mom, as I drove along. It was about my memories and associations and all kinds of rich thoughts about that relationship. Now, the funny thing about that moment was that it had been enabled by a digital device, but the real depth and beauty of it came when I put the device away and allowed my thoughts to float free.

Your claim to be an optimist about technology is interesting. In a recent article in the New Yorker*, Adam Gopnik suggested that technology pundits fall into three groups: Never-betters who are technology optimists; better-nevers who highlight ways in which emerging technology is degrading humanity; and ever-wasers who argue that our current hopes and fears about technology are nothing new – that never-betters and better-nevers have been battling since as far back as ancient Greece. Gopnik put you in the better-never group. But your position is more nuanced than that perhaps?*

Absolutely. First of all, Gopnik definitely did put me in the wrong category. I suspect that he didn't read the whole book because I am a ever-waser to the core and that's really the message of ***Hamlet's BlackBerry***. But if you only read the first few chapters,

you wouldn't know that. Still, I was happy that the *New Yorker* ran a piece about these questions and highlighted several books including mine. For a long time now, there's been an unspoken assumption that there are two teams, technophile and technophobe, and you have to sign up for one or the other. To me, that's a very boring way to think about any new invention—you must either embrace it wholeheartedly and believe it's the answer to everything, or reject it out of hand and run away from it. The reality, as history shows, is so much more interesting than that. In fact, some of the thinkers I write about have been erroneously classified in one category or the other—Ben Franklin as a pure technophile and Henry David Thoreau as technophobe. Both are crude simplifications that eliminate important twists and turns in their thinking. All the most interesting media writers, including Marshall McLuhan, recognize that the truth is somewhere in the middle. It's about shaping our response to technologies so that we are getting the best out of them without becoming hostage to them.

I really felt that no one had said that, though we're 15 years into the digital revolution. Somebody needed to say it.

It seems like a perennial challenge. Often when we hear the term "technology critic," we conflate that with "technophobe." And yet we don't do the same thing when we're talking about a movie critic. We know that a movie critic still likes movies. Isn't there a way to be a technology critic while still professing that one likes technology or that one is an optimist?

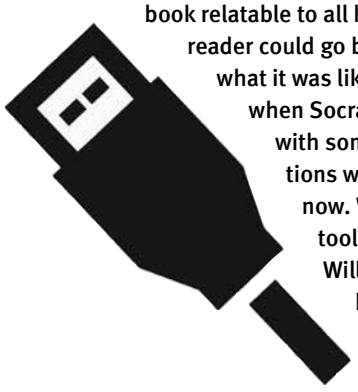
A distinction that's more helpful and accurate is between technology optimists and pessimists. I find that much more interesting because it doesn't assume you're going whole hog for one team. It acknowledges that we actually don't know whether we are going to go to a better place thanks to this new kind of connectedness, and you can lean one way or another. I do think that the difference is in some ways temperamental. Some of us are born as glass-half-empty people and some are glass-half-full. I am fundamentally an optimist and so I came at this question with that outlook and it shaped the book. But this is also what makes the book easy to mischaracterize. Superficially it can come off as pessimistic simply because I am asking questions. We are at a point in the technology conversation, in these early days, where there isn't a lot of room for nuance. I was trying to open up a space for more nuance and complexity in our thinking.

This idea that every technology that came before digital is now obsolete and meaningless – that hardcopy books are the new buggy whip, for instance – is completely ridiculous and proven wrong by history. My favorite case is the radio. You know the radio was supposed to be completely extinct 50 years ago, and yet we are still listening to it every day. In some ways, the radio is more useful than ever now because it only taxes one of our senses.

For instance, this idea that every technology that came before digital is now obsolete and meaningless—that hardcopy books are the new buggy whip, for instance—is completely ridiculous and proven wrong by history. My favorite case is the radio. You know the radio was supposed to be com-

pletely extinct 50 years ago, and yet we are still listening to it every day. In some ways, the radio is more useful than ever now because it only taxes one of our senses. I love to cook dinner with the radio on. To me, that is one of life's great pleasures, and it wouldn't work with a screen projecting visual images. That would be overload.

The key question for me, if I can extend this slightly, is: can I start that nuanced conversation in a book that will speak to the everyday person? I really wanted the so-called common reader to plug into this book. I didn't want to write it for specialists or academics or literary people. I wanted it to be really accessible. But nuance, we are often told, is not for the masses. As a writer, it's easy to fall into the trap of believing that there's no point in trying. I actually did a whole first draft of the book striving for what I had always imagined platonically my first book should be: a lot of literary illusions, very wispy references, really subtle stuff. After I handed it in, I realized it was a complete mess and no one was going to want to read it, and I threw it out. I started over, aiming for something more direct and less pretentious, but with the nuances intact. So I actually wrote the book twice. The only things that survived from the first draft were the fictional parable at the opening and the "Hello, Mother" chapter. And it was only in the second draft that I added the seven philosophers whose ideas became the heart of the book: Plato, Seneca, Franklin and the others. But it's not just their ideas. I realized that telling their life stories was a way to make this book relatable to all kinds of people. The reader could go back in time and feel what it was like to live in 400 B.C. when Socrates was wrestling with some of the same questions we're wrestling with now. What are these new tools really doing for us? Will they make our lives better or worse?



Could we circle back to that moment on the boat when you fell overboard and your phone was lost and you felt anxious about it? That may have been the first time you mentioned the term "nomophobia," which means the fear of losing one's cell phone. That anxiety that you felt personally, do you think it is indicative of larger anxieties that people have about their world, and digital technologies?

I think people have a natural anxiety about their place in the world and they seek confirmation that they matter. Over time, the ways we seek that kind of confirmation have changed. There was a time not so long ago when letter writing was still a big factor in staying in touch with people. Now the world is designed in a different way. We're living in this grid that is electronic and seeking confirmation that way, instantaneously through electronic means. And as with letters, these messages help us feel better, so we keep going back to our smartphones the way that Thoreau says people in his time kept going back to the post office—checking, checking, is there any more mail for me?—for the very same reasons. It's poignant, it's a part of who we are, and it's not something we are going to eradicate. But the question is: what if it begins to take over your life? Thoreau himself wondered that. What if your whole day revolves around going back to the post office to check on your mail? Is that an intelligent way to use your time, the brief time that you have on this earth? His answer was no, and mine is the same. Our version of this actually began in his era with the telegraph—instantaneous communication—and we are still in the midst of that shift. How do you live simultaneously with all these people, now 7 billion, and negotiate that relationship and get from it what you need to build the kind of life you want? How do you make sure you have some distance

from the crowd, the distance that's crucial, in my view, if you're going to make a unique contribution to the world?

I am just wondering if the nomophobia anxiety says anything about our relative allegiance to an individualistic sense of self or a communitarian sense of self. On the one hand, in America we idealize the vision of the cowboy going off into the sunset, of pulling ourselves up by our bootstraps, of relying on one's own initiatives without having to rely too much on others. On the other hand, nomophobia suggests that we're actually quite dependent on others and want close ties with other people. Is nomophobia revealing an anxiety about how we see ourselves, that sense of selfhood?

Well, it's a tricky question because it cuts two ways. The digital revolution lays bare in a new way the essential tension between these two drives. Yes, we are trying to get closer to other people and in many ways becoming more dependent on them for that basic self-confirmation. But the screen is also a tool of individual expression. We have a voice in the world, a reach that we didn't have twenty years ago. So the individualistic ideal and the communitarian/global village vision are both at play. For some years now, I think we have been leaning strongly toward dependency and the need to feel that you are in touch with your crowd all the time.

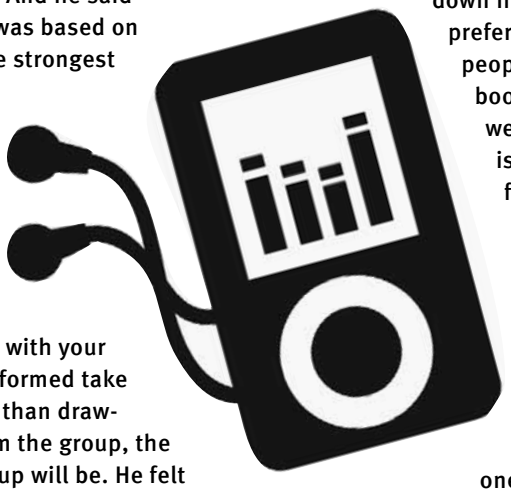
Which is why, when I fell out of the boat, I was initially anxious and worried and mad at myself. It was only after a while that this other sensation came over me and I felt, wait a minute, this is a state I remember, a state that was important in my development as a person. Autonomy and self-reliance are the path to wholeness and fulfillment. But as the Stoics recognized, they're acquired skills, and society always throws up obstacles to our learning them. Walking around all day worrying about what others are saying and thinking about you—Are there any comments on my comments? Do I have enough Twitter followers?—these questions are very ancient. Lately, I have been reading the Chinese philosopher Chuang Tsu who is one of the progenitors of Zen Buddhism. This was one of his great themes, the notion that we are constantly worrying about where we stand in the social and political pecking order. Some people yield completely to that pressure and it ruins them. This is exactly what we are facing with the new imperative so many feel to stay connected all the time, to own the latest gadget and be on the hottest social network. The best tool for combating these forces is a deep sense of self-sufficiency. But to get there, you have to take a philosophical journey. You can't do it with an app or by taking a pill. You really have to awaken to your own selfhood and its potential. We in America fortunately have a great tradition of phi-

This was one of Chuang Tsu's great themes, the notion that we are constantly worrying about where we stand in the social and political pecking order. Some people yield completely to that pressure and it ruins them. This is exactly what we are facing with the new imperative so many feel to stay connected all the time, to own the latest gadget and be on the hottest social network. The best tool for combating these forces is a deep sense of self-sufficiency.

losophers who were very articulate on this theme—Emerson, William James, many others. I'm amazed that more people aren't reading these thinkers today, when we need them most.

Are being an individual and being a member of a crowd mutually exclusive experiences?

You know Emerson at one point in his life was invited to live at Brook Farm, a utopian community that was being put together just outside Boston in pursuit of the pure communitarian ideal. And he said no. His decision was based on his belief that the strongest communities are by definition collections of individuals. And the more that you come into any group as a true individual, with your own individually formed take on things, rather than drawing your take from the group, the stronger that group will be. He felt that the way this new community was being set up, he was going to have to give too much of himself away. In its earnest idealism, Brook Farm was a very American experiment, but in another way, Emerson's response was even more American. "Wait a minute; I'm not going to surrender that much of my individuality to any community," he was saying. It's an argument we are still having—it's actually a theme in the 2012 presidential campaign, with the debate over "individual mandates" in health care and other questions. Who's striking the balance in a smarter way? The Democrats have one answer, the Republicans have another, and digital technology is very much in the mix, though we don't often discuss it in these terms.



Isn't that interesting. We are able to note it certainly in overt political discourse, but the same issues are being played out in digital realms as well?

Yes, I think so. Essentially we are all deciding—should I move to the Brook Farm that is being offered to me by whatever technology company has launched its new device or platform? And you can't predict what any one person is going to decide. You can't predict by age or by demographics. People's circumstances in life, I find, don't predict where they are going to come down in terms of digital habits and preferences. Lately I meet young people who are fleeing Facebook, just at a moment when we are being told Facebook is the future They are not fleeing digital life, but some just aren't as into this one tool as they used to be. Yet I have an aunt in her 90s who is online all the time, especially Facebook, and loves it. Multiplicity rules, and that's a good thing. It's not just one flavor for everyone

When you use the phrase "being hostage to our tools," it reminds me of Thoreau's worry that we may be "tools of our tools." Do you think that we are losing control over our technologies or is it something to worry about? Does the challenge of building a good life in the digital age depend on not being hostage to one's tools? Is it partly about regaining some control over where technology may be leading us?

Yes, that should be one of our primary goals. First, we don't want society at large to become a hostage to technology. The extreme version of that would be gadgets taking over the world, which so far has occurred only in science-fiction. And then

on the individual level, we don't want our own particular lives to be usurped by the tools, either. I see some people on the train to Boston spending the entire ride staring into their smartphones. In a way, they seem to be serving the device's needs, rather than it serving theirs. This is backwards, of course. Not only should we be in charge of our tools, we should be demanding more of them. They're not meeting all of our needs now, and the hold they have on our attention is one of their biggest flaws. There are many frustrated families, frustrated school systems, frustrated individuals, who want their tools to be less of a slave driver and more of a helper. Fortunately, we live in a market economy, and the consumer is ultimately in charge. So we can drive the change with our wallets. Over time I believe we will.

In the book The Filter Bubble *Eli Pariser says that while Google's mantra may be "Don't Do Evil," the company has accumulated so much power that it has the potential to do a lot of evil. But you are saying that the marketplace may help to mitigate that threat?*

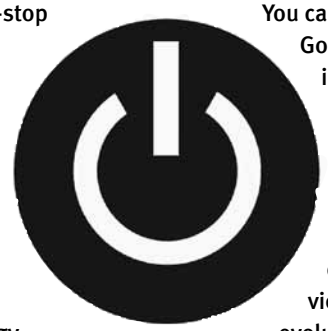
There are certainly aspects of the marketplace life that are discouraging to me. For example, the way in which some people now view digital technology as a tool of consumerism and nothing more. That plays into this fear that digital is just a way to mine our lives for profits or "monetize" us. Is that really all modern society is about, selling mouthwash and deodorant? Or are we on a larger journey? When you meet some of the technologists, as I have since the book came out, you quickly discover they are not ogres. They are normal, well educated people who mostly are in it for the right reasons. They want to do well by doing good. But there is also the need to meet the bottom line and, if you are a public company, to have the share price continue to go up. That is nothing new. For centuries, publishers have been walking a line between serving the lowest common denominator of consumer tastes and shooting for something higher, trying to take civilization to a better place. Similarly, there are all kinds of people within the digital industry who are shooting for a higher place.

Certainly we can find lots of people in corporations who are good folk with honorable intentions. But are those intentions adequate to mitigate the vectors, which you talk about, of digital maximalism or the vectors of the marketplace that are encouraging us in many ways to connect more and more. I think from former comments, it seems you are fairly optimistic about that.

When I look back at the historical record, which is the best data we have on how these transitions work out, I do see cause for optimism. In the late 19th early 20th centuries, there was a lot of concern that we were dehumanizing ourselves, that people were becoming simply cogs in the industrial machine. Dickens, Dostoevsky and many others were concerned about this and wrote very powerfully about it. The same questions are still in the air today, but if history is any guide, there's no reason to assume the story will end badly. If you look at what became of those soot-spewing smoke stacks that Dickens wrote about in *Hard Times*, or the technologies that Henry Adams worried could destroy our humanity, the nightmare didn't happen. Or it did happen and people realized it and did something about it. Civilization is not circling the drain, in my opinion. What we have built digitally in the last twenty years is kind of miraculous when you think about the industry and the ingenuity required to

produce such tools, and the enthusiasm with which people have not just embraced them, but figured out new ways to use them. Despite the downsides, there is an awful lot of ferment and good stuff happening. So, yes, I am an optimist. Despite the stumbles that we make and the periods of foolishness that we go through, it eventually does settle out in a wiser place, a better place. The book's epigraph is from Emerson: "This time, like all times, is a very good one, if we but know what to do with it." I can't say it any better than that.

In all honesty, though, I really wondered when I first set down to write the book—this was in early 2007—"Am I the only one who feels this way?" Sometimes I felt like a fool, writing this book. I worried it was going to be ignored or laughed at. And what happened? I have been talking about it non-stop for a year-and-a-half solid and it's now part of a much larger conversation. I think we sometimes don't give ourselves credit for the multiple levels on which we are collectively working on the big questions, even as we are going through what appears to be an infatuation with a new technology.



Are you suggesting that we shouldn't worry about our technological fate overmuch? The historical record indicates that we've worried about the effects of technology since very early on. Our anxieties are not new and yet we continue to endure. If our worries aren't new, is there any real urgency to these questions now? Or is history going to take care of itself?

I think there is a certain urgency. In every period of change, it is very important for people to stand up and raise these questions. I was born in 1961 in the age of television and I don't remember, because I was too young, but there were all these questions then about the downsides, the "vast wasteland" that TV supposedly was producing. To me, looking back, that seems kind of silly because television seems fairly harmless to me now and my family, and I enjoy it and we don't feel addicted to it or diminished by it at all. But the fact that those questions were raised may have helped improve popular thinking about television, and even the content. Sure, there's a lot of junk on TV, but there's quite a lot of good stuff, too. Perhaps we wouldn't have shows like *The Wire* today if people hadn't raised those concerns long ago. Simply by questioning the assumptions of the moment and having this conversation that many people are now having, I believe we are moving the tools down a better path and helping to ensure that we don't become "the tools of our tools" (to use Thoreau's phrase).

You can see it in small changes, like Google's social network, which was in many ways a response to the complaints about Facebook, the ways in which Facebook wasn't meeting everyone's needs. Is Google Plus the answer? Probably not, but there will be new efforts of this sort. The critical view is essential to the techno-evolutionary process. Otherwise the tools themselves would just run rampant and that is definitely not what we want.

Interesting. When we think of innovation we often think of it as technological invention. But maybe we should think of it also as the wise adoption of technology. Perhaps your book is zeroing in on this dimension of innovation?

Ben Franklin said it very well. I use this line of his at the start of my Franklin chapter: "All new tools require some practice before we can become expert in the use of them." Now that doesn't fully cover the idea of innovation through wise adoption, but he does hint at it there. He is kind of saying that we need to make sure our practices evolve in the smart-

est way possible. So, yes, absolutely, the tools arrive and then we work on how to use and improve them.

Since this conversation is taking place on a university campus, I was wondering how these concepts might shed light on one of the hotter technology issues that is challenging universities right now: namely, how to most wisely take advantage of recent improvements in mobile technology. In your book you talk about Walden zones: these are areas where we can escape from the distractions that are presented by our digital devices. Many of these Walden zones seem to be place-bound. But in a mobile world does a Walden zone always have to be place-bound? I have a student who said he was able to write most productively in the din of a subway. Is it possible to have mobile Walden zones?

Yeah, I think we absolutely could. That is one of the great lessons I took from Seneca, in a letter he wrote that I talk about in the book. You can quiet your mind anywhere, he contends, if you have the right mental discipline and creativity and desire. You can be in the middle of busy Rome with all kinds of street noise and clamor and find your focus. You can get past the traffic jam in your mind, which is my metaphor for what was happening to me in my own consciousness as a result of screen addiction. And I think if colleges and universities are seeking to take a lot of learning mobile, teaching that Senecan skill should be a part of it. Ideally in higher education, you're training people to be their own thinkers and philosophers. The only way they can do that effectively is to know how to nurture their own creative focus. Right across the way from where we're speaking right now, I noticed there is a designated quiet space for study and reading. Could there by a mobile version of that? A tool that helps people disconnect when, say, riding the subway? Printed books have always offered a version of that—a way of connecting that simultaneously focuses and settles the mind. Someday there will be college courses in how to navigate a digital world effectively. One of the best courses I took in college was a Spanish course called Oral Survival. It was about exactly that, learning to speak Spanish off the cuff, in any place and any situation, and survive the experience. Today we need digital survival skills, so that we're able to throw ourselves into this maelstrom and thrive, using techniques that we have practiced and can easily put to use. Colleges are the best place for such teaching to happen. Do you know if it is?

Ideally in higher education, you're training people to be their own thinkers and philosophers. The only way they can do that effectively is to know how to nurture their own creativity of focus. Right across the way from where we're speaking right now, I noticed there is a designated quiet space for study and reading. Could there by a mobile version of that? A tool that helps people disconnect when, say, riding the subway? Printed books have always offered a version of that – a way of connecting that simultaneously focuses and settles the mind.

I like to think that it is happening in college courses that study how technology and society reshape each other. Certainly we have stress management courses; maybe there need to be courses in information overload.

I wouldn't give it a negative name. I would call it something constructive and positive. It's not a rejection of the technology. It's about not buying into the assumptions of one particular approach, the one I call digital maximalism, i.e. the more connected you are 24/7, the better. Maybe if we use a different set of values, it will actually take us to a better place as students and we will achieve more and prepare ourselves more effectively for whatever career we are aiming for.

So the answer to digital maximalism isn't digital minimalism, is it?

No, I don't think there is one answer. Most people have jobs that require a lot of digital activity—that is a reality. But in a larger sense we live a lot of our personal lives online now, and that's where we have more leeway. In that zone, there will be people who want a more minimalist approach to technology and would prefer to be in the so-called real world more often. That should be an option that is honored, as should all the other shades in between as well as the maximalist approach. I just don't accept the proposition that we all have to adopt one approach or that one size fits all. Here's to digital pluralism!

By way of wrapping up I wanted to pose a few questions from students who read your book in a class I'm teaching this semester. The first is: "Do you think our current age poses particular problems that technology in the past has not?"

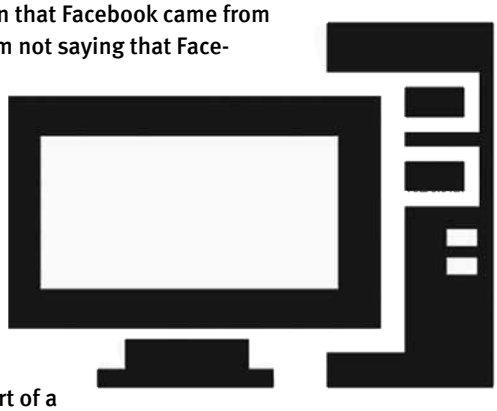
In every age there is kind of a recapitulation of the old questions, but there are also new ones added. So in our time, the one thing that is the really dramatic, epochal change is connectedness going mobile and ubiquitous, so that we are always reachable and others can always reach us. That is something humanity has never known before, a shift we are still getting our arms around. We all try to be very hip and casual about the smartphone life as if we're experts at it. But we're still learning and there are parallels from previous times that can be quite instructive. That's not to say our world is just like the world of 150 years ago. Henry David Thoreau never woke up with 50 messages waiting for him in his inbox on the nightstand. But we can still learn from him and apply his insights to our own situation.

We all try to be very hip and casual about the smartphone life as if we're experts at it. But we're still learning and there are parallels from previous times that can be quite instructive. That's not to say our world is just like the world of 150 years ago. Henry David Thoreau never woke up with 50 messages waiting for him in his inbox on the nightstand. But we can still learn from him and apply his insights to our own situation.

This next student is posing a question about class: "Digital trends tend to move from the privileged class downward. What is your feeling? Are the problems you tackle the problems of a privileged class?"

That is a very interesting question. The basic idea of living philosophically, according to your own particular worldview, tends to come from education, time spent reading and contemplating what life is about. In much of the world, and for a significant percentage

of Americans, that sort of education is still a luxury. So in that sense, it is a class issue. But on another level, I would never claim that the need for space and quiet time is something that is only the province of the rich and successful. In all societies and all spiritual traditions, there is some version of the ascetic, a person who chooses poverty as a route to higher enlightenment. Sometimes those people come from wealthy families, as the Buddha did. But often they are humble people who through their own resourcefulness found the road to enlightenment. Interestingly, a lot of the less appealing aspects of digital culture are actually coming from the top. You know, this notion that Facebook came from Harvard, and I am not saying that Facebook is not appealing, but Facebook and many of these tools are partly about showing the world how many connections you have. It's sort of a peacock-like display, which is very traditional elitist behavior. At the same time, if elites are highly immersed in digital culture, as most now are, they are also well-positioned to question it, and that's also happening. Meanwhile, in another way digital life is also very populist. You know, there is a whole world on Twitter that is basically urban young people having their own conversation about the things that they care about. That is a fascinating alternate universe, if you will, to the elite conversation. And it's based in the very same tool that is delivering celebrity tweets. Does that make sense?



Yes. It resonates with the shift from 20th century broadcast technologies, which were basically top down, to the much flatter 21st century media technologies, which enable many more people to participate in the conversation.

Today it's easier for everyone to have a voice. Whether you choose to use it is a different question, but it is relatively easy and cheap to get into the digital zone without having to get past any gatekeepers. You can even do it from a public library. To me it is fascinating that the silicon gazillonaires are having to think more than business-people of the past ever had to about the voices and concerns of regular people everywhere, from the streets of Cairo to the highrises of Detroit. There is some promise in that.

Does that mean that these digital technologies are inherently democratic?

Well, I don't know about that. I think they bring great democratic possibilities, but it remains to be seen if those will in fact flourish.

A few months ago, Kathy Davidson published a book titled Now You See It. *Davidson begins her book by going over the famous Invisible Gorilla Experiment. In the experiment an audience is asked to count the number of ball passes that a group of performers are making in a hallway. While the audience is counting, a man in a gorilla suit makes his way across the hall. In focusing so intently on the ball pass count, some of the audience miss seeing the gorilla. Davidson uses that experiment to argue that when we mono-task we're subject to attention blindness. But she goes further in arguing that the celebration of mono-tasking is an ideology particular to 20th century modes of assembly line production. Davidson argues that we've moved into a new world where mono-tasking is no longer the virtue it once was. If we're going*

to educate students responsibly, we have to be more receptive to multi-tasking and the possibility that the current workplace demands that skill set. How would you position Hamlet's BlackBerry *vis-à-vis* Now You See It?

It would very nice to think that we could become expert multi-taskers. I'd love to be one. But all the scientific evidence is stacked against that ever being possible. People have been trying to be good multi-taskers for centuries, with very limited success. I have a little passage in the book that's based on an interview I did with Christopher Chabris, one of the co-authors of ***The Invisible Gorilla***. He was my best source on how our attention resources really work. "It's possible that our brains will eventually adapt to a digital world and learn to better manage all of these pulls on our attention. The organ's plasticity, or ability to change by re-wiring itself, is well known. However, neuro-plasticity is not the panacea it is sometimes made out to be. There are fundamental limits to our attentional capacity based on the amount of brain space we have for what is called 'working memory.' For that to grow would require a structural change far more significant than the re-wiring of neural pathways. So, despite the touted benefits of the brain-training gadgets being marketed as solutions to attention problems, it isn't that easy." No question we'll continue trying to become better at multi-tasking, but there is an obstacle called "recovery time" that so far seems to be insurmountable. Simply put, when you shift your attention from task A to task B and then back to A—which we do on the screen all time—there is a process you have to go through called recovery time, which is simply the re-immersion of the brain in the first task. It's basically the "Where was I now?" moment." The longer you're away from a task, the longer the recovery time. And nobody has figured out how to speed that up. In fact, there is at least one study suggesting that the more today's students multi-task, the worse they do on various kinds of tests.

It would very nice to think that we could become expert multi-taskers. I'd love to be one. But all the scientific evidence is stacked against that ever being possible. People have been trying to be good multi-taskers for centuries, with very limited success.

At the Leonardo Museum in Salt Lake City, on the second floor, there is a clinic where they take a sample of your saliva and have you do a thirty-minute multi-tasking test. The hypothesis of their study is that there actually is a multi-tasking gene, but that only a very small percentage of the population has inherited it.

Yes, there is a pretty well known study about this, which found that only about 2% of human beings are born "super-taskers," meaning they have a genetic ability to multi-task more effectively than the rest of us. It's apparently a mutation of some kind. Now it could turn out that in the long-range of human evolution, those people will thrive and multiply and become more broadly present in the population. If super-tasking becomes a crucial part of survival in the digital world, I suppose that theoretically could happen. I am currently reading Edward O. Wilson on his latest theories about the genetic future. But evolution is a very slow process that can't be compressed into a few generations.

This is another student question: "I find it interesting that self-control and motivation are not really touched on as solutions to the technological overload we as people are experiencing. Do you think that such control is out of reach? Are we too far gone to choose for ourselves if we check our screens or not?"

My book is largely about self-control and discipline and the role of individual initiative in solving this problem. I'm proposing that anyone can take the reins of his or her own life by developing new habits. I like what the philosopher William James said about the power of habits, and where new habits come from. He said, if you're living for a higher purpose beyond yourself, you can kick any bad habit and replace it with a good one. His work was the inspiration for Alcoholics Anonymous, and the same basic thinking applies to digital life. We don't have to be creatures of the conventional wisdom about technology. We can make our own rules, shape our own daily journeys, online and off. I went on a speaking tour of Australia last summer and found they're having a very lively debate about this topic— livelier than we're having in this country. I went on a national radio show and the host asked me, "Well, have you heard about the Pomodoro method?" and I had not. Turns out, the Pomodoro Technique for focus and productivity, which I think comes from Italy, is well-known in Australia. It is all about self-control and applying it to digital life and striking a healthy balance. Australians seem to be more familiar with this whole question—but then I've been told that Australia has the highest per capita usage of social networks so maybe they need to be more on top of it. Anyway, I do think that the cutting edge of happiness in the digital age involves the role of the individual. That's where it all begins and ends.

Only about 2% of human beings are born "super-taskers," meaning they have a genetic ability to multi-task more effectively than the rest of us. It's apparently a mutation of some kind. Now it could turn out that in the long-range of human evolution, those people will thrive and multiply and become more broadly present in the population. If super-tasking becomes a crucial part of survival in the digital world, I suppose that theoretically could happen.

So we have the ability and responsibility to take control of our online lives. And your book is urging us to take up that task. At the same time, does that mean that we shouldn't also be looking at the way these technologies may be pushing us in particular directions?

Right, in addition to individually shaping our own lives, we should be questioning the larger assumptions that are driving these tools. Are there ways in which the tools themselves are flawed and have to change? When we are still essentially talking about organizing your life around the tools. But we made these tools, and as consumers, we have supported them and given them a life in the marketplace and so we should have a role in making them better. There was a skit on ***Saturday Night Live*** that got at this in a hilarious way. It was the world 3,000 years from now with people watching a documentary about how we lived today. And they were

all sitting in a kind of nightclub in these silver space suits laughing uproariously about the idea that we walked around with a gadget in our hand that we used to access digital information. Because by then digital information had become truly ubiquitous, embedded in the environment, and no screens were required. I think, inevitably, people are going to look back at the year 2012 and say, "Oh, isn't it amazing that they thought you had to do it that way? They thought the iPad (or fill in the blank with some other tool) was the ultimate answer." Of course the tools are going to get better and, as I noted earlier, we can drive that as consumers. By speaking up and asking tough questions and being a critical user of technology, you are helping the process move forward.

Luke Fernandez is Manager of Program and Technology Development as well as a half-time instructor in computer science at Weber State University. He received his Ph.D. in Political Science from Cornell University and is a recipient of an NEH Digital Humanities Grant. He has published in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, *Educause Quarterly*, *Campus Technology*, *AcademicCommons* and *AAC&U Peer Review Magazine*.