

Technology and Religion

Lesson 10: Technology and the Spiritual Path

12.16.2018

Objectives: Reflect on ways technology manages reality for us, versus spiritual practices that summon us to an ever greater Reality beyond our preferences.

Materials: Flipchart, laptop/LCD.

Time allotments suggested for 50 minute class, followed by 25 minute closing service.

1. Nametags and Graffiti Wall (5 minutes before class begins)

- Make nametags using blank paper, markers, and holders. Youth can create their own unique but LEGIBLE nametag. Make it a regular practice to wear nametags.
- “Graffiti Wall” questions: Write the following on whiteboard. Invite youth as they arrive to grab a marker and weigh in with their responses:
 - ▶ Has digital technology and the internet deepened your sense of community? If so, how?
 - ▶ Do you have a regular spiritual practice? What is it?
- Teachers complete attendance sheets.

2. Silly Fun: “Go, Grab, Go!” (5 minutes max)

Participants stand in a circle, arms out to the side. Left hand palm up, right index finger pointing down and touching neighbor’s outstretched palm.

When teacher says “GO,” youth do two things: (1) try to grab the finger in their left hand, and (2) prevent their right finger from being grabbed. Repeat several times.

Then add a bit of challenge by having youth NOT go on “GO” but wait until they hear the word “Technology” before they try to grab fingers (i.e. “Go... Go... Go... Technology!”)

3. Chalice Lighting: Light the chalice, saying these words together: “We light this chalice as a symbol of our faith, the light of truth and the warmth of love.”

Teacher reads: (from Eli Pariser, internet and political activist)

“As a young geek in rural Maine, I got excited about the Internet because it seemed that I could be connected to the world. What it’s looking like increasingly is that the Web is connecting us back to ourselves.”

4. **Watch clip:** “How to control someone else’s arm with your brain” (10 minutes)
http://www.ted.com/talks/greg_gage_how_to_control_someone_else_s_arm_with_your_brain?language=en

Questions for Discussion:

- Greg Gage shows us technology that can copy one person’s brain signals and inject it into another person’s hand, in a sense losing our free will as another person has control over our hand. In what situation might that be desirable or good? In what situation would that not?
- Gage demonstrates one person’s control over another person’s **body**, and the person in the video **knows** that another person’s brain signal is controlling their movement. But what are ways that technology can control our **minds/lives** without even our knowing that’s happening?
[which leads into our next video...]

5. **Watch second clip:** “Beware online ‘filter bubbles’” (20 minutes)
http://www.ted.com/talks/eli_pariser_beware_online_filter_bubbles?language=en

Questions for Discussion:

- What is Pariser’s point about the “invisible, algorithmic editing of the Web”?
- Some have made the point that “filtered searches” and “personalization” may be suitable for **consumers** but not for **citizens**. How important is that difference? Why?
- Pariser concludes: “I know that there are a lot of people here from *Facebook* and from *Google* – Larry and Sergey – people who have helped build the Web as it is, and I’m grateful for that. But we really need you to make sure that these algorithms have encoded in them a sense of the public life, a sense of civic responsibility... We need it to introduce us to new ideas and new people and different perspectives. And it’s not going to do that if it leaves us all isolated in a *Web of one*.”
How does technology *both* connect us *and* isolate us in a “Web of one”?
- How have you (could you) used the internet/digital technology not only as consumer but as a practice of citizenship, social justice, and civic responsibility?

6. **Reflecting together: Filter bubbles and spiritual practices:** (15 minutes)

Questions for Discussion:

- Think further about “filter bubbles” that keep us from being introduced to new ideas/people/perspectives. What are other filter bubbles of digital technologies in general that keep us selectively confined to our preferred modes of living?

- Preferred modes of **time** (e.g. immediacy vs. slow, instant vs. delayed gratification, 24/7 vs. seasonal)?
- Preferred modes of **space** (e.g. virtual space vs. actual interpersonal, online chat rooms vs. face-to-face dialogue, personal vs. public space)?
- Preferred modes of **social exchange** and self-expression (e.g. in-person vs. talking over phone vs. texting vs. email vs. *Facebook*... and with what frequency)?
- Preferred modes of **knowing** (*Wikipedia* vs. news media vs. library vs. thinking/reflecting vs. talking with someone vs. trusting when we can't/don't know)?
- Preferred modes of dealing with **conflict** and interpersonal challenges (e.g. from avoiding to “unfriending” to social media rants to in-person)?
- Preferred modes of **community** and relationship (e.g. social networks vs. blog/online forums vs. grassroots communities vs. neighborhood groups and faith communities etc.)?
- How could digital technologies appropriately filter our interests/goals without entrapping us in our filter bubble?
- Consider familiar spiritual practices across religious traditions: fasting, prayer/meditation/contemplation, communal worship, hospitality to strangers, leaving home for pilgrimage, alms giving/care for the poor, forgiveness for enemies. Spiritual practices seem intentionally to counter or transcend “filter bubbles” and our preferred modes of living. How could our use of digital technology also be a form of such spiritual practice?

7. Extinguish the chalice, saying together:

“May the light of truth and the warmth of love go with us in our hearts.”

8. Help clean up classroom before leaving: Please keep regular practice of readying classroom for the next class.

- leave lesson plan and all materials organized
- wipe the whiteboard clean
- tables and chairs neatly returned
- nametags collected in Ziploc bag
- leave any comments for RE staff on attendance sheets