

The Seductress

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Today, I must have walked into an energy black hole. Every piece of electronic equipment I own went down: Lap-top computer crash, cell phone freeze-up, card reader self destruct; even my stereo (old and analog) crashed. I was thrown back 25 years.

While I was ranting and raving about, “Crummy Cheapo technology,” I was forced to confront how “hooked” on technology I’ve become. I don’t begin to consider myself a “techie,” yet here I am seemingly dependent on technology: I write these words on a computer while I’m listening to a CD or Pandora. I use a digital camera with computer enhancement. When these devices go down, my life changes and really slows down. This isn’t necessarily a bad thing, *when I’m at home and not at work.*

While having all this stuff go down when I’m at home just noodling around is inconvenient, it’s not a disaster. When this same circumstance occurred while I was at work, it was an unmitigated catastrophe. It’s one thing to have a stereo fritz, but it’s a whole new level of serious when one’s EMR crashes or when our spiffy electronic phone systems with their myriads of functions go down.

It’s really embarrassing, for example, when you have to sit in an exam room and tell Ms. Jones, “Well, I know you came in today to discuss your lab results, but unfortunately our Electronic Medical Records system is down, for I don’t know how long, so we really can’t discuss those results. I’ll guess you’ll just have to reschedule.” And fork over another co-pay.

Technology is seductive. It lures you into its web. It promises a life of ease and wonder. “Look at all the cool stuff you can do. You can do stuff today that was undreamt of ten years ago.” You can send photos instantly, book airplane tickets, navigate your car to anyplace on Earth. You can keep your patients’ medical records nice and neat and have it do all kinds of flashing, ever increasing reminders. It’s irresistible. Even when we try to resist, we can’t.

And once you’ve been snared in technology’s web you’re hooked. Soon, without realizing it, you’ve become dependent and addicted. However, like any good seductress, technology’s promise far surpasses the reality. Salome’s dance of the seven veils wasn’t nearly so enticing once that seventh veil came off. Are any of us really “happier,” now that we have smartphones, instead of

searching out an old style pay telephone to make our calls? Are our social lives any better when we spend hours on Facebook, rather than meeting face to face? Do our patients get better service after navigating 25 levels of phone menus rather than speaking to a live person?

We've become dependent on a non-dependable way of life. Our technology is powerful, but it's also very vulnerable. Our technological infra-structure is beautiful, but it's a flimsy, shimmering illusion. Any rogue electron or power surge or lightning strike can send us back twenty five years to the neolithic days of the 1980's, or earlier. This doesn't even take into account the acts of true sabotage or terrorism; witness the attacks on our local Sudden Link last year. And when that vulnerability gets exploited we become paralyzed, and go through a form of withdrawal. "Oh my, our systems are down, what are we going to do?" We can't discuss our patient's cases or order meds or tests. We can't make purchases except with cash. We can't do our banking, and for some higher tech types, their cars won't even function.

All advances come with costs and trade-offs. The automobile freed us from horses, but made us dependent on the oil companies and increased environmental catastrophes. What are the trade-offs we're incurring by becoming so dependent on computer and internet technology? Do our computers provide better patient care at the expense of losing one-on-one physical and eye contact? Do flashing reminders improve patient outcomes? Does our Smartphone GPS app help us find our destination better than an old-fashioned road map? Can we get to Paris faster by booking on line rather than using a travel agent?

While I was going through my mini-trauma of technology breakdown, I had a vision of the old High School Health films we were forced to sit through, the old *Reefer Madness* paradigm of the local drug pusher stalking the school grounds: "Try some. The first one's free." That's how I was feeling about technology. I had been lured by the local pusher into an addiction I can no longer control. Over the past 30 years I've been seduced by easy word processing, on-line banking, computer art, stay at home shopping.

I'm not sure if it's even possible any more to disengage from the system. I used to kid people that if we really wanted to "go off the grid," we'd have to become squatters on Federal Land. Now, I'm not even sure that is even possible.

I don't have any answers to our technology addiction. There is no buprenorphine for technology and its gauzy illusions. But we at least need to think about this every time we order something new from Amazon or download our next smartphone app.

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