HABITS OF MIND IN AN AGE OF DISTRACTION

Small steps to meet the challenge of hearing God in a technologically disruptive environment.

by Alan Jacobs

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Hidden away in the 1662 Book of Common Prayer may be found a small masterpiece of pastoral theology called "A Prayer for Persons Troubled in Mind or in Conscience." The prayer is a kind of exploded collect—longer and more complex than is typical:

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> *O Blessed Lord, the Father of mercies, and the God of all comforts; We beseech thee, look down in pity and compassion upon this thy afflicted servant. Thou writest bitter things against him, and makest him to possess his former iniquities; thy wrath lieth hard upon him, and his soul is full of trouble: But, O merciful God, who hast written thy holy Word for our learning, that we, through patience and comfort of thy holy Scriptures, might have hope; give him a right understanding of himself, and of thy threats and promises; that he may neither cast away his confidence in thee, nor place it any where but in thee. Give him strength against all his temptations, and heal all his distempers. Break not the bruised reed, nor quench the smoking flax. Shut not up thy tender*

> *mercies in displeasure; but make him to hear of joy and gladness, that the bones which thou hast broken may rejoice. Deliver him from fear of the enemy, and lift up the light of thy countenance upon him, and give him peace, through the merits and mediation of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*

This prayer has not achieved a prominent place in the Anglican tradition, although it contains great wisdom and comfort.

The place of this prayer in the prayer book is significant: it is one of the prayers for the sick. What is the nature of this sickness? The person prayed for here has mistaken the character and the purposes of God. She has looked back over her life and seen the sin and darkness therein and cannot see anything else: she has been "made to possess her former iniquities." Moreover, and worse still, she takes these iniquities and her consciousness of them as signs of God's displeasure toward her. Like Shakespeare's Macbeth she has "a mind of scorpions." The priest who comes to this woman in her time of need is instructed by this prayer to see her condition not less as God's punishment than as the sign of a diseased mind in need of healing. And only God can bring this healing.

So what does the prayer ask God to do? To give her a "*right* understanding of herself."

John Newton said at the end of his life, "I am a very old man and my memory has gone. But I remember two things: that I am a great sinner and that Jesus is a great saviour." Either of these two things is death, taken alone; but taken together, they are life eternal and abundant. The woman whom our imagined priest is visiting has lost half of the equation: she knows herself only to be a great sinner.

To have a right understanding of herself she must have a right understanding of God. God is not her punisher, but her deliverer: she must not "cast away her confidence" in him. There is so much to be set right, so much misunderstanding of self and God, so many terrors that must be overcome that she also must not place that confidence in anything or anyone *except* God.

But how did this poor woman get in such a condition?

MUM THE PERSIL-USER

Before we can properly answer, we need to turn to John Betjeman's poem "Original Sin on the Sussex Coast." Watching happy children coming home from a day at school, he remembers his own childhood nearby—and remembers that other happy children, indistinguishable from the ones he now sees, once took particular delight in beating him.

> *. . . Off they go*
> *Away, away, thank God, and out of sight*
> *So that I lie quite still and climb to sense*
> *Too out of breath and strength to make a sound.*

Then a pause, and a meditation:

> *Now over Polegate vastly sets the sun;*
> *Dark rise the Downs from darker looking elms,*
> *And out of Southern railway trains to tea*
> *Run happy boys down various Station Roads,*
> *Satchels of homework jogging on their backs,*
> *So trivial and so healthy in the shade*
> *Of these enormous Downs. And when they're home,*
> *When the Post-Toasties mixed with Golden Shred*
> *Make for the kiddies such a scrumptious feast,*

> *Does Mum, the Persil-user, still believe*
> *That there's no Devil and that youth is bliss?*
> *As certain as the sun behind the Downs*
> *And quite as plain to see, the Devil walks.*

Persil is a laundry detergent, and if you look at the history of Persil advertising, you'll see that the emphasis has pretty much always been on the cleaning of children's clothes. By calling Mum "the Persil-user" Betjeman is telling us that there is only one kind of uncleanness she is concerned with, and it's the kind that laundry detergent can fix. Mum is in the grip of a comprehensive ideology that, in this particular situation, has three interlocking elements.

First: youth is bliss because children are *innocent*. Don't all our TV shows and ads remind us of this every day? Our problems are not caused by anything internal to us, any deficiency in our fundamental makeup, but solely by external forces.

Second: those external problems are fixable by *technology*—in this case, the technologies of cleanliness, sanitation, hygiene.

Third: it is possible to *purchase* those technologies, and since those technologies keep your children clean, it would be quite irresponsible for Mum not to take advantage of them.

Ideology is, by definition, not a body of explicitly held beliefs but the unspoken, unacknowledged system of ideas that lie beneath and provide the unexamined foundation for all our explicitly held beliefs. Its purpose, then, is to bring certain things into our sphere of vision while hiding other things. What Mum sees is a ruddy-cheeked little boy in shorts with a book satchel on his back: the very picture of young innocence and bliss. But could she strip away the blinders of her ideology, Betjeman says, the Devil walking along the Sussex downs would be quite as real, quite as evident, as the sun.

Betjeman's point in those closing lines is actually very subtle. To borrow a phrase from C.S. Lewis, we do not, in this late afternoon on the Sussex coast, see the sun (it has gone behind the downs) but *by its light* we see everything else. So too with the Devil: we have no direct perception of the Evil One, but the effects of his existence are everywhere. So:

"As certain as the sun behind the Downs / And quite as plain to see, the Devil walks." But Mum the Persil-user doesn't see it. The underlying and unconfronted structure of her thoughts and experiences makes such clear vision simply impossible.

Now, let us compare Betjeman's "Mum" with the woman "afflicted in mind and conscience." She and Mum, the Persil-user, clearly lie at opposite ends of a moral spectrum. One sees no evil within; the other sees nothing but evil within. For one external cleanliness matters, and can be bought; for the other internal cleanliness matters, and cannot be bought at any price. Both are, as Kierkegaard would say, in a state of illusion; but their illusions are mirror images of each other.

So to return to my earlier question: how did the afflicted woman get into this terrible predicament? I think it is likely that this is a case of self-examination run amok. Here is a person who, at the instruction of her church, has looked into her heart, and every time she looks the scene appears darker. She needed someone to tell her what W.H. Auden once said: "The same rules apply to self-examination as apply to auricular confession: *Be brief, be blunt, be gone*." She may have been blunt, but she wasn't brief, I expect, and most of all, she was never *gone*: she stayed in her own head until it became to her a house of horrors.

But it is impossible to imagine Mum the Persil-user suffering from a surfeit of self-examination. It is impossible to imagine her practicing self-examination at all, because she lives within a cultural frame that strongly discourages self-examination. Indeed, for this frame self-examination is a kind of Kryptonite: if we genuinely look within, that frame will lose its power over us, because we will see that it has nothing to sell us that will fix our deepest problems.

NOUS SOMMES MUM

We all live in that cultural frame now, indeed in a deepened and intensified version of it. We are all Mum the Persil-user. There are still, of course, persons afflicted in mind and conscience, but I'd wager there aren't nearly so many of them as there once were.

So what do we do with the great majority of people for whom excessive self-examination is the *last* problem they're likely to face? I think this is one of the most important problems Christians—and especially pastors—face today. Because all the forces that went into making Mum the Persil-user have increased their power quite dramatically in the subsequent decades. People today now believe even more intensely than she did that not just children but all of us are essentially good; the technological products that promise to

fix whatever ails us have multiplied and diffused themselves into every imaginable area of our lives.

But there is one more force that does more than all of the others put together to make self-examination—the kind of self-examination that leads to an awareness of sin—nearly impossible.

In one of his most insightful writings, a talk called "Membership," C.S. Lewis distinguishes membership in a body from both *individualism* (which erases our identities by cutting us off from other people) and *collectivism* (which erases our identities by absorbing them in a vast abstraction). These twin perversions of true identity are always dangerous, and dangerous to everyone, but are profoundly hostile to Christian belief and practice— especially when we are taught to think that religion is an essentially *private* affair. Lewis writes:

> *In our own age the idea that religion belongs to our private life—that it is, in fact, an occupation for the individual's hour of leisure—is at once paradoxical, dangerous, and natural. It is paradoxical because this exaltation of the individual in the religious field springs up in an age when collectivism is ruthlessly defeating the individual in every other field. . . . That religion should be relegated to solitude in such an age is, then, paradoxical. But it is also dangerous for two reasons. In the first place, when the modern world says to us aloud, "You may be religious when you are alone," it adds under its breath, "and I will see to it that you never are alone." To*

> *make Christianity a private affair while banishing all privacy is to relegate it to the rainbow's end.*

This passage reminds me of something the comedian Louis C.K. said a few years ago, in an appearance on Conan O'Brien's show. Louie, as his friends call him, was explaining that he doesn't want his kids to have cell phones because he wants them to be sad. And sadness comes when you are forced to be alone with your thoughts: "That's what the phones are taking away, the ability to just sit there. That's being a person."

He described a day when he was driving along as an emotionally intense Bruce Springsteen song came on the radio, and he started to feel a certain melancholy welling up in him, and his instant response to that melancholy was to want to grab his phone and text someone. "People are willing to risk taking a life and ruining their own, because they don't want to be alone for a second," he said.

But on that day when, in his car, Louie felt the melancholy welling up, he resisted the temptation to grab his phone. As the sadness grew, he had to pull over to the side of the road to weep. And after the weeping came an equally strong joy and gratitude for his life. But when we heed that impulse to grab the phone and connect with someone, we don't allow the melancholy to develop, and therefore can't receive the compensatory joy. Which leaves us, Louie says, in this situation: "You don't ever feel really sad or really happy, you just feel . . . kinda satisfied with your products. And then you die. And that's why I don't want to get phones for my kids."

FREEBASING HUMAN CONNECTION

If you ask a random selection of people why we're all so distracted these days—so constantly in a state of what a researcher for Microsoft, Linda Stone, has called "continuous partial attention"—you'll get a somewhat different answer than you would have gotten thirty years ago. Then it would have been "Because we are addicted to television." Fifteen years ago it would have been, "Because we are addicted to the Internet." But now it's "Because we are addicted to our smartphones."

All of these answers are both right and wrong. They're right in one really important way: they link distraction with addiction. But they're wrong in an even more important way: we are *not* addicted to any of our machines. Those are just contraptions made up of silicon chips, plastic, metal, glass. None of those, even when combined into complex and sometimes beautiful devices, are things that human beings can become addicted to.

Then what are we addicted to?

In February 2016, Ben Rosen, a twenty-nine year-old writer for the massively popular website Buzzfeed, wrote a post about what he had learned about the social media service Snapchat by talking to his thirteen-year-old sister Brooke.

He got interested in this topic when he watched Brooke reply to forty snaps—that's the basic unit of Snapchat, like a tweet on Twitter—in less than a minute. So he asked her questions about how she uses, and thinks about, Snapchat. Three things emerged from that discussion.

First, for Brooke and her friends Snapchat is almost never text, it's all images, usually selfies in which they respond to one another with various facial expressions, as though they're using their faces to imitate emoticons. Second, Brooke is not unusual in being able to do forty of these in a minute. Third: When Rosen asked Brooke how often she's on Snapchat she replied, "On a day without school? There's not a time when I'm not on it. I do it while I watch Netflix, I do it at dinner, and I do it when people around me are being awkward. That app is my life."

Brooke also noted that "parents don't understand. It's about being there in the moment. Capturing that with your friends." And when her brother asked her how she could even mentally process forty snaps in less than a minute, much less respond to them, she said, "I don't really see what they send. I tap through so fast. It's rapid fire." Snapchat is a form of communication drained almost completely of content. It is pure undiluted human connection.

So there is a relationship between distraction and addiction, but we are not addicted to devices. As Brooke's Snapchat story demonstrates, we are addicted to *one another*, to the affirmation of our value—our very being—that comes from other human beings. We are addicted to being validated by our peers.

OUR ECOSYSTEM OF INTERRUPTION TECHNOLOGIES

If you don't believe in God, you might not think this craving for validation is a problem. But if you do believe in the God of Jesus Christ, it doesn't look good at all. As Paul the apostle asks the Galatians, "Am I now seeking the approval of man, or of God? Or am I trying to please man? If I were still trying to please man, I would not be a servant of Christ" (1:10).

Now, to be sure, there is one sense in which we should care what people think of us. Paul tells the Romans, "give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all" (12:17). But that is in order to commend Christ to the world in all that we do and say, to avoid being a stumbling block to those who might otherwise come in through the door of faith. That's a very different thing than seeking to "please man" because you so desperately crave their validation. If you measure your personal value in the currency of your Snapchat score, then you will be profoundly averse to doing or saying anything that might lower that score or even limit its growth.

A few years ago the science-fiction writer Cory Doctorow published an essay in which he referred to "your computer's ecosystem of interruption technologies." Keep in mind that Doctorow wrote that phrase *before* smartphones. My iPhone's "ecosystem of interruption technologies" makes the one on my computer seem like pretty weak sauce, because the latter is on my desk or in my bag while the former is ever-present. And it's ever-present because I *like* it that way. I *choose* the device that interrupts my thinking and, as Louis C.K. observed, gives me an ever-present opportunity to escape unwanted emotions.

I am a living illustration of Technological Stockholm Syndrome: I have embraced my kidnapper. Or, to change the metaphor yet again, I have welcomed this disruptive ecosystem into my mental domicile and invited it to make a home for itself here—like those poor kids who let the Cat in the Hat in.

But an awareness of the potential gravity of this situation has gradually dawned on me. I have been significantly affected by this pocket-sized disruptor, even though I had decades of formation in a different attentional environment to serve as a kind of counterweight. People like Ben Rosen's sister Brooke, the Snapchat queen, clearly don't have any of that. I wonder what her future—her future as a *self, as a person*—will hold.

Our "ecosystem of interruption technologies" affects our spiritual and moral lives in every aspect. By our immersion in that ecosystem we are *radically* impeded from achieving a "right understanding of ourselves" and of God's disposition toward us. We will not understand ourselves as sinners, or as people made in God's image, or as people

spiritually endangered by wandering far from God, or as people made to live in communion with God, or as people whom God has come to a far country in order to seek and to save, if we cannot cease for a few moments from an endless procession of stimuli that shock us out of thought.

It has of course always been hard for people to come to God, to have a right knowledge of ourselves and of God's threats and promises. I don't believe it's harder to be a Christian today than it has been at any other time in history. But I think in different periods and places the common impediments are *different*. The threat of persecution is one kind of impediment; constant technological distraction is another. Who's to say which is worse? —even if it's obvious which is more painful. But I really do think we are in new and uniquely challenging territory in our culture today, and I don't believe that, in general, churches have been fully aware of the challenges—indeed, in many cases churches have made things worse.

In his 1996 essay "Philosophy . . . Artifacts . . . Friendship," the Catholic priest and theorist of technology Ivan Illich provides numerous insights into these challenges for the church in our age of distractions. He writes:

> *The novice to the sacred liturgy and to mental prayer has a historically new task. He is largely removed from those things—water, sunlight, soil, and weather—that were made to speak of God's presence. In comparison with the saints whom he tries to emulate, his search for God's presence is of a new kind.*

> *. . Today's convert must recognize how his senses are continuously shaped by the artifacts he uses. They are charged by design with intentional symbolic loads, something previously unknown.*

And remember, Illich wrote all this *before* the Internet. What he wrote then is even more true now: the age of television and print ads for Persil now seem a very primitive endeavour indeed. If then it could be said that "our perceptions are to a large extent technogenic," they are now almost wholly technogenic, for most of us. If Illich is right to say that "the novice to the sacred liturgy and to mental prayer has a historically new task," then that means that the church who would draw such novices has a historically new task as well.

SINNERS IN THE HANDS OF—SQUIRREL!!

And what Illich says about how we "search for God's presence" is related to how we understand and talk about and preach sin.

When George Whitefield and John Wesley were preaching sermons that created the First Great Awakening, they almost always *started* by trying to arouse in their hearers a conviction of sin. The typical sequence of their sermons looked like this:

> *1. You are a sinner, though no more, or less, of a sinner than anyone else.*
> *2. We sinners cannot rescue ourselves.*
> *3. But God in his grace and love has come to rescue us.*
> *4. So we need only to accept that grace and love, in penitence, to be reconciled to God.*

But I don't believe we can readily reach people today with the same sequence. The very *idea* that I am a sinner sends me groping for my smartphone to avoid unpleasant emotions. I think this will be especially true for the majority of North Americans whose basic default theology is what the sociologist of religion Christian Smith and his colleagues call Moralistic Therapeutic Deism. For such people an awareness of sin is going to be hard to achieve—certainly at the earlier stages of their Christian lives.

But what if we tried to tell people that by disconnecting, however temporarily, they might be able to hear God? Consider these thoughts by Rowan Williams:

> *The true disciple is an expectant person, always taking it for granted that there is something about to break through from the master, something about to burst through the ordinary and uncover a new light on the landscape.*

> *And I think that living in expectancy—living in awareness, your eyes sufficiently open and your mind sufficiently both slack and attentive to see that when it happens— has a great deal to do with discipleship, indeed with discipleship as the gospels present it to us. Interesting (isn't it?) that in the gospels the disciples don't just listen, they're expected to look as well. They're people who are picking up clues all the way through.*

We need to put people—those who don't yet believe, those whose belief is young, those whose lives with Christ have become attenuated in a "technogenic" environment where our thoughts are largely directed by engineers— in a position to "pick up clues."

If I have read the signs of the times accurately, the first clues are likely to suggest the presence and activity of God; next, God's love and grace. An awareness of sin is not likely to come early in the process. St. Paul tells us that the goodness of God leads us to repentance (Romans 2:4); that may need to be our watchword in these times. If people can come to know that divine goodness, then they may understand the flaws in their

nature through contrast to it. And that may be the path by which people in our world can come to a right understanding of themselves.

For Anglicans the major resource is, of course, the Book of Common Prayer, and more particularly Thomas Cranmer's subtle and ingenious adaptation of the Daily Office for the use of laypeople. As vigorously as I applaud the centrality of the Eucharist to Anglican worship that has developed over the past 150 years or so, I think we may be at a point in our cultural history at which we need to turn more attention to the resources carried by our own versions of the Daily Office. In particular, we should place greater emphasis on contemplative services in the prayer book: Evensong, Vespers, Compline—but also Morning Prayer without music.

We should encourage parishioners to adapt these services for home use as well; and place special emphasis on training people in contemplative practices. Teaching about and reflection on technology should be a permanent and central part of church ministry, including pastoral understanding and regular conversation about the fears associated with silence and a lack of stimulation.

The church need not repudiate, or crusade against, digital communications technologies. But it cannot allow its—*our*—habits and practices to be determined by the massive multinational corporations that control these technologies, and have their own agendas for how we use them, agendas that care nothing for the development of true personhood in Christ. In all this the church must accept and embrace its status as a fully countercultural institution. It need not seek to produce persons troubled in mind or conscience; but if it cannot produce persons who *have* minds and consciences, it will surely die.

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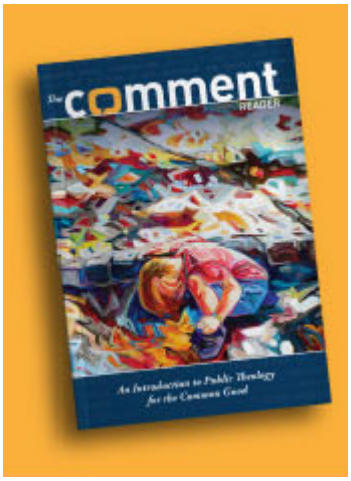
BIO



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