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Unfriending Convenience

Why Christians are called to inefficiency in an age of easy living.
CHRISTINA CROOK / POSTED JUNE 21, 2018



Image: Benedetto Cristofani

were nowhere online, and my contact with them all but evaporated.

In Tristan Harris's words: I was forgetting.

Harris, a former Google insider who has grown in celebrity by publicly questioning how technology affects us, [told *Wired*](#) earlier this year: "When you use technology, you have goals. When you land on YouTube, it doesn't know any of those goals. It has one goal, which is to make you forget those goals that you have."

Harris grew up in the Bay Area and attended Stanford University, where he studied human-computer interaction, social psychology, and habit formation. He went on to found Aapture, a startup that built highlighting and search tools for web browsers [and was acquired](#) by Google in 2011—a golden feather in Harris's cap.

Once inside Google, however, Harris quickly became unnerved by the tremendous energy and capital being spent to make better, slicker, more addicting products by manipulating the vulnerabilities of its users.

Harris wrote up his concerns in an internal document titled "A Call to Minimize Distraction & Respect Users' Attention." It claimed that if he and his product manager colleagues continued to measure their output by their ability to distract and hold the attention of

It was about two years after I signed up for Facebook when I noticed how lackadaisical I had become in my relationships.

We'd moved across the country, from Vancouver to Toronto, the year before. It took just one cross-continental flight to shift a lifetime of relationships onto the internet. In short time, "staying in touch" looked like scrolling through other people's posts. I could do it at my convenience, anytime day or night. The only problem was that a few of my closest family members

users, then they were simply participating in a race to the bottom of the brainstem. “Everybody will lose,” he wrote. “We have to stop.”

The manifesto received unprecedented attention internally, and Harris soon became the company’s “design ethicist.” Yet he quickly realized he couldn’t redesign a business model to give back more of people’s time within a global ad-based system designed to do the opposite. Harris left Google with the aim of sparking a grassroots, ethical tech revolution to put pressure on Silicon Valley giants like Facebook, Apple, and his former employer. His work, and the work of others like him, should be of particular interest to Christians. How we live with communications technology is the cultural issue of the next half-century, and Christians—who are characterized by a core commitment in life—have a unique perspective to offer.

“I believe God has two postures toward technology—idolatry and opportunity,” James Kelly, founder of FaithTech, a ministry designed to bridge the gap between the faith and technology communities, told me in a recent interview. “That’s where I see God standing.”

Kelly cites Hebrews 12:1–2: “Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.”

“We are called to throw off all that hinders,” Kelly said. “When it comes to a particular technology, the question is not ‘Is this sin or not?’ The question is ‘Did it help me run with Jesus? Did it help me to serve him well?’ ”

The Tyranny of Efficiency

To understand why we continue choosing apps and platforms designed to addict us, we need only consider our tidy online profiles, the ease of mobile ordering, and the soothing voice activation of Alexa. Each of these time-saving applications serves our predilection, fulfilling technology’s promise to get everything under control and increase productivity with as little difficulty as possible. They’re the path of least resistance in an already full and often volatile life. Apple, Google, Amazon, and Facebook are more than willing to pave the way for our convenience in return for our time and attention.

Writer Tim Wu calls it the tyranny of efficiency.

“Today’s cult of convenience fails to acknowledge that difficulty is a constitutive feature of human experience,” Wu [wrote](#) in *The New York Times*. Making things easier isn’t wicked, Wu argues, but the promise of “smooth, effortless efficiency . . . threatens to erase the sort of struggles and challenges that help give meaning to life. Created to free us, it can become a constraint on what we are willing to do, and thus in a subtle way it can enslave us.”

Our online environments—where we now spend the lion’s share of waking hours—can be controlled, while the natural world and the human experience are intrinsically unpredictable. A meaningful life may offer a mix of suffering and joy. It’s a painful way, filled with many unknowns, much disorder, and assured valleys along with the mountaintops. That’s why, once we’ve tasted the pleasures of ease, it’s difficult to turn away.

The Allure of Convenience

My Facebook experience drove home that lesson. I was discontent with the voyeuristic ways I was conducting relationships but had more or less made peace with it, until one fateful day. I logged onto Facebook after having been away for a few days and saw a message on my wall. *My friend was in town! She was asking to meet up! My heart swelled with excitement at the prospect of seeing her.* I checked the date stamp on the message. It was four days old. I had missed my friend traveling through Toronto.

It took a full day for the emotions to cycle through me: excitement followed by disappointment followed by frustration, then anger. *Why hadn't she put in some effort to email me directly? Why hadn't she called? Had she even wanted to see me?*

Slowly, realization washed over me. I'd been ditching people I said were important to me for more than a year. I'd allowed the same kinds of roundabout ways of communicating to sneak into my own life. Blaming the online platform didn't cut it.

That day I promised myself I would start connecting as directly as possible with the people in my life. It set me on a journey to unfriend convenience in an effort to better serve my loved ones and, ultimately, my own heart.

The Gospel of Good Burdens

“What happens when technology moves beyond lifting genuine burdens and starts freeing us from burdens that we should not want to be rid of?” asks University of Montana philosopher Albert Borgmann in his book *Technology and the Character of Contemporary Life*. “If we believe that we, as humans, were created for relationship and meaningful work, work that provides for families and serves neighbors, work that engages our bodies and creative faculties, then it follows that we would value a certain kind of burden,” he explains.

Borgmann calls them “good burdens”: responsibilities that tether us to people and the physical world. These include “the burden of preparing a meal and getting everyone to show up at the table and sit down. Or the burden of reading poetry to one another or going for a walk after dinner. Or the burden of letter-writing—gathering our thoughts, setting them down in a way that will be remembered and cherished and perhaps passed on to our grandchildren. These are the activities that have been obliterated by the readily available entertainment offered by TV”—and every other screen in the 21st-century home, office, or classroom.

Stepping out of our algorithm in this way is essential to moving out of a set position and into relationship with God and others, explained Mary Clark Moschella, who teaches pastoral care and counseling at the Yale Divinity School, in an interview with me. “The joy of being in relationship,” she said, “is that we step outside of ourselves.”

Every meaningful relationship in our lives is based on a mutual dependency. Lovers. Parents and children. Neighbors. Yet our centuries-long aim has been to erase our dependencies. Instead of fading away, though, our dependencies have just shifted: from people to technology. We don't want to be a bother to others; we don't want to embarrass ourselves by asking a “stupid question,” so we Google. We don't bring our needs to our neighbors, like borrowing a shovel or two cups of flour; instead, we tap Amazon Prime.

As our dependency on technology increases, our reliance on others disappears and so do the expected and unexpected intimacies that come with it. But those intimacies are the stuff of life. Jesus knew this. He cared so much about being human that he became human. He chose to embody the limits of humanity, put himself in the middle of a depressed colony in the Roman empire, and saved the world in the most holy, inefficient way. He said no to the temptations of ease when provoked in the desert.

As Christians, how have we been co-opted into society's push for productivity over presence, and what have we lost in the process? The strongholds of data-driven efficiency have us beat at every mark. We have no grounds to compete. We only have the altar. Does the inefficient way have a cost? Yes. It will cost "followers," relevance, platform, and power. The inefficient way is also the way to love, and without love we have nothing.

Coming Closer

In recent years, my husband, our three children, and I have attended churches that use traditional liturgies. After being baptized in the Christian Reformed Church, "re-baptized" as a teen in the Vineyard Church, and attending Anglican, Presbyterian, and Catholic churches, I know the many-colored coat of the body of Christ pretty well.

Many Sundays I've stood there feeling like the church has more than mastered the way of inefficiency. I've railed against its seeming tediousness. What I've learned slowly in the process is that the words, the silences, and even the frustrations of losing my place in the service (so many times losing my place in the service!) can be viewed as opportunities for formation. I'm bending my attention and my will to the Word of God and being changed in the process. I'm being called outside of myself.

The living, breathing body of Christ—the church in all its forms—is uniquely poised to offer what the world is desperately searching for: embodied presence, true vulnerability, inconvenient service, utter acceptance, abundant love.

It is here, in this efficiency-obsessed age, that Christians are called to lead. Because we believe we are embodied beings made by a holy God. We believe we were created for relationship and for meaningful work that provides for families, serves our neighbors, and engages our bodies and creative faculties. We believe we are called to carry burdens, good burdens: responsibilities that tether us to people and the physical world, to time and place, to our humanity. Our weakness—the beautiful mess of embodied community and imperfect worship—could prove our greatest strength in this cultural moment.

Something of this was in my mind one night last year when I needed to ask my next-door neighbor a question. Instead of firing a couple of quick texts, I bundled up my two elder kids and scurried across the front lawn in winds of -15 degrees Celsius to knock on her door. In the warmth of her doorway, not only did I get the answer to my question, but we also talked at length about some of our challenges with parenthood. And then I saw it: the crack in her demeanor, tears at the ready.

My neighbor was in need, and my physical presence let it come out.

The world is looking for the inefficient way to love. We, who are saved by and for relationship, can—and must—show the way.

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