

“Faith and Community in the Digital Age: A Response to Wes Avram” by Stacey Simpson Duke for @ *This Point*, © Columbia Theological Seminary

“We shape our tools and thereafter our tools shape us.”<sup>1</sup> In going beyond issues of utility to explore questions of ontology, Wes Avram makes the case that social media are not neutral tools; they are fundamentally altering how we think, how we see, what we do, and who we are.

There is no question that, individually and collectively, we are undergoing some sort of transformation created by our digital environment. The endpoint of this transformation is as yet unseen and unknown; we are in flux, as social media rapidly changes (compare this year’s Facebook to last, for instance) and as social media continue to rapidly change social norms (to see a person in a restaurant, taking a picture of her meal with her phone, is no longer a curiosity).

At issue for those of us with commitments to faith and faith communities are whether or not these changes are shaping us and our communities for good or ill and how to navigate these changes faithfully. Wes Avram highlights three particular areas of theological concern: how social media affect *boundaries*, how they affect *the experience of time and space*, and how they affect *intuition of transcendence*.

Our sense of the boundary between private and public has shifted and continues to shift. Depending on what is at stake, this shift may be innocuous, quaint, banal—whereas once no one knew what everyone else was eating for breakfast, now we read about it or see pictures of it in our Facebook, Instagram, or Flickr feed. Or the shift can be truly dangerous and alarming—mothers posting pictures of their diapered babies or adolescent daughters in bikinis, without thought of how pedophiles and predators might use such images; teenagers posting geo-tagged information that lets the world know where they are at every moment.

Even apart from issues of safety and sensibility, at stake are issues of how the virtual public affects actual community. Avram writes of how our concept of *threshold* has changed, and of how our rituals of sociability are undergoing major shifts; the teenage coffee/phone ritual he describes is illustrative and persuasive. Not only has the private become public, but now the public takes a backseat to the virtual.

The hazard here is clear, of course. We risk ignoring the embodied people right in front of us for the sake of the texts, tweets, and messages lighting up our phones; our response to those signals is Pavlovian and distressing. What lights up our screens seems to light up pleasure centers in our brains, and the feedback loop created can become addictive. Some of us become twitchy and distracted if we can’t access our phones, or if we can access them but are not getting any new likes or retweets each moment. “ADD becomes the norm,” Avram argues, and this feels true. My own attention feels more splintered now than ever before; most of us have become so adept at multitasking that it now feels strange and difficult to focus only on one thing or one person (the one in front of us) at a time.

Sherry Turkle, Professor of the Social Studies of Science and Technology at MIT and a licensed clinical psychologist, writes at length about how the breakdown of the private/public boundary has created a world in which we are always on, always tethered to a virtual world by our machines, and yet are still alone, and absent from each other. She calls this being “alone together.”<sup>2</sup> Avram gets at

this when he poses the issue of “connection” versus “connectedness.” The creation of true community—of churches, families, circles of friends—faces some difficult challenges in our current context. Likewise, our culture of frenzied connectivity can make the private and public pursuit of spiritual values and disciplines even more counter-cultural than before.

Avram rightly points out that the breakdown of boundaries has also occurred around issues of time and space, and he believes the result is not that our sense of time has been *expanded* (which is one of the implied promises of constant connectivity) but has instead been *narrowed*. This narrowing, though, is not the same as the concept of attending to the present moment that is found in the great spiritual traditions; it seems quite the opposite. The lures of instant knowledge, instant access, instant documentation, and instant feedback tempt us to exist in our lives less as participants and more as spectators and documenters; this has deep ramifications for the spiritual life and for the life of community. It creates a kind of anxiety that is not satisfied or reduced by more virtual interaction but instead seems simply to be stoked by it. It feeds a kind of narcissism that runs counter to the deep, active, practical, self-giving love we are meant to be patterning our lives after.

Avram hints at how all of this leads to some difficulty with intuiting transcendence. If God is a presence that also requires an absence, Avram posits, how is our relationship to the divine altered by our new sensibility of constant connectivity, narrowed time, and continuous chatter? How do we sustain something like prayer, which requires space, time, silence, stillness, and attention? It is difficult to appreciate a God who embodies both transcendence and immanence when our social media have flattened the world, giving us the sense that nothing transcends anymore—it seems all knowledge and all relationship is right there, in our hands and on our screens. This also makes it hard for us to remember that God is God and we are not.

The issues Avram raises are at the heart of the matter for those of us navigating faith and culture. If we want to be faithful Christians ourselves, and if we want to help shape younger generations toward Christian faithfulness, and if we want to affect our culture for good, we have to pay attention to the massive cultural shifts underway, and take note of how they are affecting us spiritually, relationally, and missionally.

It is easy, at least for those of us concerned for faith and for faith communities, to see the dangers and challenges social media pose for our relationships and our spirituality. Can we also see the opportunity for good? And how can we respond with faithfulness to the difficulties social media presents?

I see the time we are living in as a Pentecost moment. Like the early church, we have no idea which way the wind is blowing us, or what will ultimately be birthed from this moment of great flux. Boundaries are being exploded, and the world is on fire with the dazzling possibilities the new media seem to offer. Is it possible those broken boundaries can lead to new, accessible, dynamic forms of Christian community?

My own congregation has been experimenting with offering interactive opportunities for spiritual growth and community online, and the results have been encouraging. During Lent for the last two years, we’ve set up a Facebook “Lenten Journey” group; the first year, roughly half of our participants were people who were not physically able to participate in our congregation. Several were members who had moved away but still wanted connection with us. Some were young adults who lived elsewhere, had never visited our congregation, and did not have a current church home,

and they were seeking spiritual community. One young woman attended our congregation's worship services, but found it difficult to participate in the full life of the congregation because of her deafness. Each day of Lent, we convened online to read Scripture, to pray, to share our thoughts, and to reflect on Christ's calling on our lives. Was this not true community because it wasn't embodied in a physically present way? It felt like community, and the people who participated felt the experience helped them grow spiritually.

The accessibility offered by social media—allowing people to connect despite physical separation—has enormous implications for how the church can reach out to individuals and the world. When we consider how physical disability has traditionally functioned as an isolating factor, we can see that a new world is opening up for us. My father is the full-time caregiver for my mother, who has been a paraplegic for 16 years; they live on their own in the country. It is very difficult for them to make it to church more than twice a month. Yet, thanks to social media, my parents' circumstances do not have to isolate them from the care and connection of others. They connect with other church members on Facebook, they receive emails from friends, they can Skype with their grandchildren who live 800 miles away.

Can there be such a thing as “virtual church”? There already is.<sup>3</sup> Is it less valid than traditional church? Traditional theological understanding would argue that incarnational community is vital to a fully enfolded faith. Is physical community the only valid form of incarnational community, though? Given my own experiences of online friendships, I am open-minded. Could we consider the possibility that the Holy Spirit may yet work through texts, tweets, messages, and videos to draw us toward each other and toward more faithfulness? I'm optimistic.

Regardless of what we think of virtual church, a pressing question remains: how do we help people participate in the Christian story, given our current social media landscape? We know there is no going back to our pre-digital state. Unless something of an unimaginable (and catastrophic) magnitude occurs, our children will never know what it's like to live in a world where they do not have information at their fingertips and options on their screens. Social media is here to stay, though the forms it will take remain to be seen (considering what didn't exist just 10 years ago—Facebook, iPhones, Skype<sup>4</sup>—it's easy to see that we can't really conceive of what might exist 10 years hence). Given this reality, what practices might help shape us toward continued Christian faithfulness?

Avram points to one such practice: resistance and rest. He writes of drawing certain lines—not allowing his children universal access to the internet, not allowing them to have smartphones while in high school, instituting a log-off time of 10:30p.m. The Christian tradition has always recognized the need for Sabbath time; can we also apply this principle to social media?

Earlier this year, I had a conversation with some of our youth about their use of social media and discovered that some of them are not getting adequate sleep, not because of the demands of homework, but because of the demands of social media. They are so anxious about missing out that they cannot seem to shut down the screens. Even at church, some of them find it difficult to put their phones away. I have begun a practice with them of collecting their phones when we meet. The first time I did this, a 15-year-old girl said, “Thank you.” She recognized the anxiety and stress the constant connectivity was causing her. After some discussion, the youth group decided that, for Lent, they wanted to take on a discipline of disconnecting from all screens for an hour a day. *They knew they needed more silence and space in their lives.* All of us do. This Lenten experiment was difficult for

many of us (including me), but it offered us a taste of expanded *kairos* time—a little bit of Sabbath each day. I believe our churches would do well to advocate for a regular practice of disconnecting from our devices.<sup>5</sup>

Writing before the full advent of social media, Albert Borgmann, professor of philosophy at the University of Montana, critiqued the “device paradigm”<sup>6</sup> (the way technological devices slide into the background of our lives, delivering commodities we want or need, without our actually having to engage in a deep or meaningful way with their procurement). As a “counterforce” to the hidden power of technology over our lives, Borgmann proposed a recovery of “focal things and practices.”<sup>7</sup> A focal thing is concrete and simple, but has the power to engage both body and mind.

“Commanding presence, continuity with the world, and centering power are signs of focal things.”<sup>8</sup> A focal practice is “the decided, regular, and normally communal devotion to a focal thing,”<sup>9</sup> and would include such things as creating music, knitting a blanket, reciting a poem, going for a run, sharing a meal. Borgmann particularly holds up for Christian communities the focal practices of Word and table.

People are hungry for focal practices today—consider the explosion in crafting (knitting, sewing) and in running. The fact is, these practices are being fueled in part by social media connections.<sup>10</sup> I myself learned to knit *from the internet* in 2005 becoming a knitblogger in 2006, and ultimately becoming a knitwear designer in 2010. When I learned to knit, none of my friends or family members was a knitter; without social media, I would not have found or learned this focal practice. Social media helped connect me to an ancient art and a contemporary community. A community I first connected with online has become a community I have met up with at various times in person; some of them are now friends I know I could call on in any crisis. Similar communities spring up all the time online, around running, CrossFit, photography, veganism, parenting—and, yes, religion. What can churches learn from the outreaching, supple, and organic creation of such communities? What can we learn about using social media to nurture focal practices? How can we be open to the creative potential social media offers while still being mindful of the ways social media makes us inhospitable to the holy and to each other?

I agree with Avram’s concerns and share some of his theological anxiety, especially around how social media can disrupt and drown out the silence, stillness, and reflection we must have for nurturing faithfulness. At the same time, I’m open and optimistic, and committed to being creatively and collaboratively engaged with social media in the pursuit of faithfulness.

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<sup>1</sup> This statement has been widely attributed to Marshall McLuhan, the communications theorist who coined the expressions, “the medium is the message” and “the global village.” As is often the case with social media, once this quote was attributed to McLuhan, everyone has continued to attribute it to him, but without sufficient citation. Some indicate it is found in his 1964 book *Understanding Media*; it does exist in the introduction to the 1994 re-release of the book, but that is penned by Lewis Lapham (MIT Press, Reprint Edition, October 24, 1994; xi, xxi). A few people assert that the phrase, though consistent with McLuhan’s thought, actually originated from his friend Father John Culkin, SJ, Professor of Communications at Fordham University (see <http://mcluhangalaxy.wordpress.com/2013/04/01/we-shape-our-tools-and-thereafter-our-tools-shape-us/>) Others cite Winston Churchill as saying something quite similar, “We shape our buildings, then they shape us.”

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<sup>2</sup> I would recommend her book, *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other*, published by Basic Books, New York, New York, 2011, as well as her TED Talk, created February 2012 and posted April 2012, found here:

[http://www.ted.com/talks/sherry\\_turkle\\_alone\\_together.html](http://www.ted.com/talks/sherry_turkle_alone_together.html)

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics/episodes/september-18-2009/second-life/4243/>

<sup>4</sup> Facebook was founded in 2004. The iPhone was released in 2007; it was not the first smartphone, but it arguably was the phone that redefined what a smartphone was for and what it could do, and made smartphones popular. A beta version of Skype was released in August 2003.

<sup>5</sup> The internet is full of examples of individuals and congregations who are experimenting with a “social media Sabbath” or fasting from social media.

<sup>6</sup> Albert Borgmann. *Technology and the Character of Contemporary Life: A Philosophical Inquiry*. Chicago, Illinois: The University of Chicago Press. See especially Chapter 9, “The Device Paradigm,” 40-48.

<sup>7</sup> Borgmann, *Technology and the Character of Contemporary Life*, see Chapter 23, “Focal Things and Practices,” 196-210.

<sup>8</sup> Borgmann, *Crossing the Postmodern Divide*. Chicago, Illinois: The University of Chicago Press. 1992. 119-120.

<sup>9</sup> Borgmann, *Power Failure: Christianity in the Culture of Technology*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Brazos Press. 2003. 22.