

**Embodied Attention: Learning from the Wisdom of the Desert and Saint Augustine  
in an Age of Distraction**

by

Kathryn Ann Davelaar

Duke Divinity School  
Duke University

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Approved:

\_\_\_\_\_  
Fred Edie, Supervisor

\_\_\_\_\_  
Ken Carder, Supervisor

\_\_\_\_\_  
D.Min. Director

Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Ministry  
in the Divinity School of Duke University  
2014

ABSTRACT

**Embodied Attention: Learning from the Wisdom of the Desert and Saint Augustine  
in an Age of Distraction**

by

Kathryn Ann Davelaar

Department of [Department]  
Duke University

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Approved:

\_\_\_\_\_  
Fred Edie, Supervisor

\_\_\_\_\_  
Ken Carder, Supervisor

\_\_\_\_\_  
D.Min. Director

An abstract of a thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Ministry  
in the Divinity School of Duke University  
2014

Copyright by  
Kathryn Ann Davelaar  
2014

## **Abstract**

Throughout the life of the Church, certain habits have been cultivated to shape the identity of its community and deepen our communion with God. We see in the writings of the Desert Fathers that attentiveness is one habit that people of faith have taken care to cultivate to better connect with God. Contemporary of the Desert Fathers, Saint Augustine, also speaks to attentiveness and its relation to time. What both the Desert writers and Augustine understand is that our ability to connect with God depends on our ability to be attentive in the present moment.

This thesis will argue that an embodied, present attentiveness is foundational to a relationship with God; furthermore, given the patterns of attention developed around Wireless Mobile Devices (i.e. smartphones) and the strong pull on its users for their constant interaction, I argue that the practices created around these devices do in fact hinder one's ability to connect with God, despite their other potential for good.

The thesis will employ qualitative research in the form of literature reviews. First, drawing from the practices of the Desert Fathers and Augustine's understanding of the relationship between time, memory, and knowledge of God, I will make a case for the discipline of embodied attentiveness to the present moment as foundational to our relationship with God. I will then draw from current psychological, sociological and anthropological insights to model how the current technological landscape places

particular pressures on an embodied present attentiveness, with specific focus on the Wireless Mobile Device (WMD), commonly known as the smartphone. I will then place in conversation the findings from these reviews; leading to an assessment on the patterns technology creates around attentiveness.

People are becoming increasingly aware and concerned that the Internet and Wireless Mobile Devices are not neutral mediums and consistent exposure (and use) of these mediums is affecting us. We will see in this thesis that not only are habits of communication shifting, but also we are literally being rewired as our neural pathways are firing into uncharted territory. While psychological, sociological, and philosophical assessments of communication technologies and the self are critical to understand various implications on attentiveness, the goal of this thesis is to articulate the practices that the use of Wireless Mobile Devices cultivates regarding attentiveness through a theological lens

As we begin to understand the concerns of the Saints who have gone before us, combined with understanding the shifting landscape of technology as it pertains to attentiveness, we can imagine why it is that the Church ought to be concerned with the continued cultivation of the discipline of attentiveness. Rather than simply “sounding the alarm” that technology is detrimental to our spiritual formation, however, this thesis will attempt to help the Church have a more nuanced understanding of why social media inhibits our ability to be attentive, as it examines to what end (*telos*) our attention

is being drawn. After developing a more robust understanding of why a present, embodied attentiveness is foundational to our relationship with God, we will be able to enter into conversations regarding social media that are nuanced beyond it having “positive” and “negative” effects.

# Contents

Abstract .....	iv
Introduction .....	1
1. Where have we been? The Wisdom of the Desert: Building a Case for Attentiveness... 9	
1.1 Space and Place.....	9
1.2 Time and Memory .....	22
2. Where are we now? Current Technological Landscape .....	35
2.1 Space and Place.....	36
2.2 Time and Memory .....	45
3. Where are we headed? .....	54
4. How should we get there? Two Sermons on Attentiveness and Reorientation .....	67
4.1 The Will to Wonder: Exodus 3:1-15 .....	67
4.2 Keeping Your Back to the Future: Isaiah 30:18-21, John 14:5-7.....	77
Bibliography .....	86

## **Introduction**

Living overseas in the early 2000s, I witnessed stark social changes in the United States as I traveled back and forth from the US and the Dominican Republic. Consider norms around travel. Hopping on a plane on September 10<sup>th</sup>, 2001, I was clueless that this would be the last time I would travel with economy sized shampoo bottles in my carry-on, the last time my family would sit with me at the gate as I waited to board, and that the next time I would fly my nail clippers, bobby pins, and tweezers would all be confiscated.

One of the more shocking changes I observed when traveling was the emergence of a vast number of people walking around the airport with cell phones. As I sat people watching while waiting for a connecting plane in DFW, the scene was visually different than when I had travelled earlier in the year. How bizarre it was to observe all these people walk past one another with their phones plastered to their ears. I remember thinking: when did the States become a mecca for cell phone use? Little did I know at the time that in a few years the phone plastered to the ear would be replaced by people who appeared to be talking to themselves as they walked due to headsets and Bluetooth, and it was unfathomable to think of people using the cell phone for anything other than talking.

Things change.



Indeed, the pace at which things can (and do) change in our culture is mindboggling—particularly in regards to access to information and communication patterns in recent history. Before the year 2000, for example, none of the following technologies existed, let alone cluttered our airports and armchairs: iPod, iPhone, Wii, MySpace, Facebook, Google Plus, LinkedIn, iTunes, YouTube, Pandora, Twitter, iPad, Xbox, Satellite Radio, Flickr, Skype, camera phones, Kindle, Firefox, Blackberry, 3-D TV, Android, Club Penguin, TiVo, Broadband, Farmville, Groupon, Instagram, Pintrest, or Snapchat.<sup>1</sup>

In celebration of the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the World Wide Web, the Pew Society released a series of reports analyzing this very phenomenon. In their first report, “The Web at 25 in the US,” they asked people to report whether the Web has been “good” or “bad” for them personally and for society. Overwhelmingly people declare the Web to be “good” for them on both counts, with 90% reporting it has been good personally and 76% reporting that it has been good for society.<sup>2</sup> While these findings indicate positive feelings towards the Web as a whole, perception is not without bias, and these questions do not get us any closer to assessing the impact of the Web on people and/or society.

---

<sup>1</sup> Rosen, Larry, with Nancy A. Cheever and L. Mark Carrier, *iDisorder: Understanding our Obsession with Technology and Overcoming Its Hold On Us* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2012), 108.

<sup>2</sup> Fox, Susan and Lee Rainie, “The Web at 25 in the US,” (Washington D.C.: Pew Research Center, March 2014). <http://www.pewinternet.org/2014/02/27/summary-of-findings-3/>, accessed March 8, 2014.

In order to do this, we need to move not only beyond perception, but also past questions of whether shifts in technology are “good” or “bad.” Conversations of polarity and perception are too easily countered by the next study or research on the latest technology. Even questions about what has been gained and lost because of technology fall a bit short. Yes, I consider it a “good” thing that I can now have a video conversation with my niece and nephew; yes I am thankful for the medical technology that enabled the detection of my mother’s cancer at an early stage. No, I do not want to go back to the days of no running water or electricity. Ultimately what I do not want to lose, however, is the critical thinking that goes into the adoption of technology.

But before the normative “good” or “bad” can be addressed, we must address the question of what kind of people we are becoming from this tighter tethering between device and human. From a theological perspective, we must extend the helpful sociological and anthropological insights of Sherry Turkle and others about how our conception of self is changing, as well as insights of media theorist Douglass Rushkoff and others about why our conception of time and presence are changing. We must also look at the implications for our theological anthropology – what kind of people are we in relationship to God, and whether that is the kind of people God calls us to be.

Pew also asked some of the most prominent Internet analysts to predict the what will be true of the Web twenty-five years from now. Their answers ran the gamut from

claiming that access to the Internet will be a human rights issue to predictions of a dystopian world. One of the “guru’s” claims:

The Web will be the single most foundational aspect of people’s lives in 2025. People’s companion devices — the 2025 equivalent of today’s phones and tablets — will be the first thing they touch in the morning and the last thing they put down to sleep. In fact, some people will go so far as to have elements of their devices embedded ....We have already entered the post-normal, where the economics of the late industrial era have turned inside out, where the complexity of interconnected globalism has led to uncertainty of such a degree that it is increasingly impossible to find low-risk paths forward, or to even determine if they exist. A new set of principles is needed to operate in the world that the Web made, and we’d better figure them out damn fast.<sup>3</sup>

If these expectations are correct, the adoption of new communication tools is not going to slow down, if anything these tools are going to become faster and even more seamlessly incorporated into our lives. The “new set of principles,” or ethos, developed on how to operate in this world must take into account the rapid pace of change. This does not mean, however, that the ethos needs to be nimble and flexible as the change comes. To do so would be allowing the means to shape the ends. What is needed instead is a clear end that shapes when and how we engage with continual technological developments.

As the people of God, we have already been told what the *telos*, or end, is for all of God’s creation: New Creation, Shalom, the Kingdom of God. This Kingdom is one in

---

<sup>3</sup> Anderson, Janna and Lee Rainie, *The Gurus Speak* (Washington, D.C.: Pew Research Center, March 11, 2014). <http://www.pewinternet.org/2014/03/11/the-gurus-speak/>, accessed March 13, 2014.

which all of God's creation flourishes, in which humans' relationships are fully reconciled with God, self, and others. And if the Scripture holds true, this Kingdom of God is going to require quite a bit imagination and curiosity to see it. One way in which we cultivate (or hinder) an ability to see this Kingdom is through our liturgical practices (habits and rituals) both inside and outside of worship. In his book *Desiring the Kingdom*, James K. A. Smith suggests that our habits are formed by thick or thin practices, with thick practices being ones that are "identity-forming, *telos*-laden, and get hold of our core desire—our ultimate love"<sup>4</sup> He argues that these "thick practices" constitute and function as "liturgies"<sup>5</sup> and then considers how cultural practices can create competing liturgies (to the liturgies of the Church),<sup>6</sup> and often do so unbeknownst to us as their repetition and practice make them more and more automatic in such a way that they "become a part of the very fiber of our character, wired into our second nature."<sup>7</sup> Given the competing liturgies being developed as we attend to cacophony of texts, tweets, updates, and emails that fill our inboxes and our brains on a daily basis, will require a more disciplined attentiveness in order to spot this coming Kingdom in the midst of the competition. And not to automatically equate it with technological development. But

---

<sup>4</sup> Smith, James K.A., *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009), 85.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 39.

<sup>7</sup> Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 86.

what might this attentiveness entail, and how does it relate to our engagement with technology?

In the following thesis, I will answer this question in the following manner. First, drawing from the practices of the Desert Fathers and Augustine's understanding of the relationship between time, memory, and knowledge of God, I will make a case for the discipline of embodied attentiveness to the present moment as foundational to our relationship with God. Chapter two will then draw from current psychological, sociological and anthropological insights to model how the current technological landscape places particular pressures on an embodied present attentiveness, with specific focus on the smartphone, or the wireless mobile device (WMD).

Narrowing the focus to WMDs still leaves open a broad landscape because the device provides access to the World Wide Web (WWW), and Social Networking Services (SNS) (i.e. Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, etc.). My intention, however, is to focus less on the content accessed through WMDs and more on what affect the shift of our devices becoming more like appendages than mere technological tools may have on our understanding of an embodied presence. This phenomenon is what Sherry Turkle calls the tethered self.<sup>8</sup> My interest is moving beyond Turkle and others psych-socio-anthropological approaches by considering the relevance of theological concepts for

---

<sup>8</sup> Turkle, Sherry, "Always-On/Always-On-You: The Tethered Self." In *Handbook of Mobile Communication Studies*, James. F. Katz (ed.) (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008).

enlivening the phenomenon. Then, by drawing comparisons and demonstrating similarities between the two landscapes (the Desert and our hyper connected present), we may find surprising insights in the writer of Ecclesiastes who suggest there is nothing new under the sun (Ecclesiastes 1:9). These links will be explored in the third chapter, with comparisons drawn from a framework of understanding the competing *telos* of technology with the *telos* that shaped the thinking of the Desert Fathers. As a way forward, I will then explore what unique gifts the Church might offer to our state of present shock and will offer two sermons as a means of communicating what the way forward could be for the people of God.

My original interest in the topic came from my work with college students, and therefore my original intent was to focus on the impact of the phenomena on Millennials (i.e., the “iGeneration” or “Digital Natives”). That said, it is clear that the proliferation of WMDs is affecting people of every generation. While Digital Natives have not had to adjust to the current technological landscape as older generations have, given that the WWW and WMDs have always been a part of their world, the effects of being “always on” do not seem to discriminate based on age. As a result, while the lines between “real life” and “virtual life” that have been blurred to the point of near extinction, the phenomenon of the tethered self itself is not limited to the generation young people who never knew a time when a distinction between “real” and “virtual” even existed. For this and other reasons, while many of my anecdotes may refer to college students, I

contend that anyone (regardless of age) who interacts consistently with WMDs experiences the same effects.

In this thesis, I desire to join the growing voices of people who seek to shift the conversation from polarities to complexities. While neuroscientists, sociologists, psychologists, media theorists have been wrestling with questions and patterns of technology for quite some time, theologians have been a bit late to the conversation. Thankfully, there is a growing list of people who are changing the conversation and asking what technology means for us as the people of God, what kind of people are we becoming and how this aligns (or misaligns) with what kind of people we are called to be.

# **1. Where have we been? The Wisdom of the Desert: Building a Case for Attentiveness.**

“The immediate, unmediated contact with the moment is the clearest path to the divine union; naked, undefended, and non-dual presence has the best chance of encountering the Real Presence.”<sup>1</sup> (Richard Rohr)

Throughout the life of the Church, habits have been cultivated to shape the identity of its community and deepen our communion with God. In the writings of the Desert Fathers, we can see a deep recognition of this anthropological reality, and a specific focus on the importance of attentiveness as one of the habits necessary for better connection with God. Contemporary of the Desert Fathers and Mothers, Augustine, also speaks to attentiveness and its relation to time. What both the Desert writers and Augustine understood was that our ability to connect with God depends on our ability to be attentive in the present moment.

## **1.1 Space and Place**

In the early to mid-4<sup>th</sup> century a spiritual renewal occurred in the life of Church. This renewal came through the spirituality of the Desert Fathers. These early Christians withdrew from ordinary society and sought the solitude of the desert where they practiced radical simplicity, common sense, hospitality, and prayer.<sup>2</sup> The desert locale as

---

<sup>1</sup> Rohr, Richard, *The Naked Now: Learning to See as the Mystics See* (New York: Crossroads Publishing, 2009), 105.

<sup>2</sup> Ward, Benedicta, *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers: The Alphabetical Collection* (London: Mowbrays



a place of spiritual renewal has deep scriptural roots, as God has been leading people to and through the desert since their departure from the Garden of Eden.

Why the Desert Fathers fled to the desert in the first place is a question that brings a variety of theories and reasons. Burton-Christie sites *some* (emphasis his) of the reasons: a quest for knowledge, a flight from taxes, a new form of martyrdom, a revival of an earlier Jewish ascetical movement, a rejection of classical culture, an expression of Manichean dualism, or a response to a call from the gospel.<sup>3</sup> Some could argue that this fleeing distanced them from the Body of Christ, but the Desert Fathers and Mothers distanced themselves from the Church for the sake of becoming closer to God;<sup>4</sup> or, as Thomas Merton, simply states: “salvation.”<sup>5</sup> Ultimately, early monks and nuns moved out because “they weren’t convinced that the church in its “ordinary” manifestations showed with any clarity what the church was supposed to be about.”<sup>6</sup>

---

1975), xxii-xxvi.

<sup>3</sup> Burton-Christie, Douglas, *The Word in the Desert: Scripture and the Quest for Holiness in the Early Christian Monasticism* (New York: Oxford University Press: 1993), 4.

<sup>4</sup> While the reasons for fleeing might be varied, Burton-Christie is quick to point out that the urge to flee was not merely motivated by religiosity but also by economic realities and tensions between people. As the Roman Empire grew, two distinctive things occurred: the villages were brought under the authority of distant state officials, while at the same time the Romans (in a desire to stimulate the economy and bring more local ownership) would let or sell large pieces of land to be developed. The result was that villages became more self-contained, and social tensions rose. More pressure was placed on the small village farmer and one solution was to flee.

<sup>5</sup> Merton, Thomas, *The Wisdom of the Desert: Sayings from the Desert Fathers of the Fourth Century* (New York: New Directions Books, 1960), 3.

<sup>6</sup> Williams, Rowan, *Where God Happens: Discovering Christ in One Another* (Boston:

Their retreat to the desert was not uniform, but “rich and varied,” full of apparent contradictions, and paradoxes.”<sup>7</sup> Removing the self from society, it seems, does not necessarily bring simplicity or single-mindedness. It does, however, prove to provide space for an unmediated encounter with God, as many distractions are eliminated. Movement to the desert teaches more than merely a relinquishment of human society and human control, but dependence on God alone.<sup>8</sup> The desert is a wilderness space “barren space, a secret place, a place that humans can make nothing of themselves, where only God can do anything.”<sup>9</sup>

Our greatest insight into the life in the desert comes from *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, a collection that reads as a cross between parables and folklore. *The Sayings* are not the only a view into this world, but the collection is unique in that it provides a view into the minds of the Desert Fathers themselves. We find the early monastics asking themselves questions of what it looks like to live a life of integrity, what does it look like to know the self, what forces assaulted one from within and without, what was the possibility of achieving freedom from these forces and achieving peace and perfection in love?

---

New Seeds, 2005), 12.

<sup>7</sup> Burton-Christie, 3.

<sup>8</sup> Louth, Andrew, *The Wilderness of God* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1991), 40.

<sup>9</sup> Louth, 45.

At first glance the desert life and rule is rigorous, yet it is also a rule that is adaptable. In fact, it is the “resilience and adaptability of the desert ideal to different circumstances and different ways of life was in fact one of its chief virtues.”<sup>10</sup> This adaptability was seen by some of the early monasteries in the writings of their rules. While there is a stronger tie to the early monastics and Eastern Christianity, the desert fathers and mothers have found their way into the religious revivals, art and literature.<sup>11</sup> As one Church historian states, “if you study the history of spirituality of the spiritual life of the Church, you will find that each time there is a spiritual renewal in the Church, the desert fathers are present.”<sup>12</sup>

Of course, the movement did not come without its critics. Two of the major criticisms are that the monastic movement is “antisocial and anti-cultural” (thus contributing to the decay of human culture and civilization) and that it is “profoundly unbiblical.”<sup>13</sup> The first criticism was drawn from the notion that the deep asceticism of

---

<sup>10</sup> Burton-Christie, 8.

<sup>11</sup> As Burton-Christie testifies, threads of monasticism can be found in religious renewal movements with German Evangelicals and Piets in Pennsylvania as well as the Methodist revival in England. St. Antony is the hero in the literary work, *La tentation de Saint Antoine*. If the number of times St. Antony is used as a muse for artistic imaginations was measured, “his story would appear to have had one of the most enduring and powerful appeals to the Western artistic imagination” (Burton-Christie, 9).

<sup>12</sup> Burton-Christie, 11.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

the monastics was not only fanatical and extreme, but that it made “people so otherworldly as to be of no use in the world.”<sup>14</sup>

The second critique that the desert movement is unbiblical came loudly from early Reformers such as Wycliffe, Luther, and Melanchthon.<sup>15</sup> They did not believe that Scripture warranted the ideals and practices of the desert fathers. The early Reformers argued adamantly that Scripture did not lay the foundation for this movement. This argument against the ascetic movement had a lasting impact on Protestant historians, and it hasn't been until recent scholarship that has reassessed the place of Scripture in the early monastic movement that the debate has somewhat subsided.<sup>16</sup>

In their focus on the ascetic practices of the Desert Fathers, the Reformers perhaps missed the clear Scriptural impetus of the early monastics. In moving to the desert, the Desert Fathers were, indeed, picking up a thread that is woven throughout the Biblical narrative. The Desert has been both a symbolic and literal wilderness in the narrative of God and God's people. Moreover, we see in our history as the people of God that God has desired for [his] people to be set apart and holy (Deuteronomy 7:6-11). Furthermore, it wasn't simply the separation from society itself that shaped the early monastics to reflect more fully upon what it looks like to be the people of God. They

---

<sup>14</sup> Chadwick, Henry, “The Ascetic Ideal in the Early Church,” *Monks, Hermits and the Ascetic Tradition*, W.J. Sheils, ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1985), 7.

<sup>15</sup> Burton-Christie, 11.

<sup>16</sup> Burton-Christie, 11-16.

were shaped also by their common life together, their practice of disciplines, their worship, and certainly by Scripture. Their isolation from society and life of solitude was motivated by a deeper connection to God. Their ends, in essence, shaped their means.

And while this focus was on some kind of vertical relationship, that of their communion with God, they also understood that as they drew nearer to God they drew nearer to one another. Dorotheus of Gaza (6<sup>th</sup> century) offers the helpful imagery of a wheel with spokes. The spokes grow closer to one another as they move towards wheel's hub, or center. If we think of the center of the wheel as God, we get a picture that in drawing nearer to God we draw near to one another.<sup>17</sup> Christian mystics of all ages intrinsically understood this framework and sought to find only the "unification of their own being, not only union with God, but union with one another in the Spirit of God."<sup>18</sup> Love of God, love of self, and love of neighbor were intricately connected to knowledge of God, self, and neighbor. A deepening of any of these three naturally deepened the other.

The early monastics had a deep understanding that their salvation was bound up with the salvation of others. As St. Anthony states, God has

gathered us out of all regions, till [God] should make resurrection of our hearts from the earth, and teach us that we are all of one substance and members of one another. Therefore, we ought greatly to love one another. For [one's] neighbor

---

<sup>17</sup> Bondi, Roberta, *To Love as God Loves* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), 25.

<sup>18</sup> Merton, 17.

loves God; and [one] who loves God loves [his or her] own soul.<sup>19</sup>

It would be a misconstruction to think of the Desert Fathers living in isolation from one another, and perhaps more accurate to think of them as living in social networks. While they removed themselves from the city center, they continued to interact with the center as they went to town to buy and sell goods, and the town came to them seeking words of wisdom and advice. They were in deep community with one another and with their neighbors. Many of *The Sayings* paint a picture of this community and their interactions with not just one another, but with others as they go to and from town and as they entertain those who come to visit them.

So if connection to God, connection to self, and connection to others was one of the goals of the retreat to the space of the desert, what is the means by which they expected to get there? As Benedicta Ward explains, “the monks went without sleep because they were watching for the Lord; they did not speak because they were listening to God; they fasted because they were fed by the Word of God. It was the end that mattered, the ascetic practices were only a means.”<sup>20</sup> The monks’ focus on the ends shaped their means; they did not let their means shape their end. The *telos* was communion with God, which came through a perfection of love and holiness. Finding

---

<sup>19</sup> Bondi, 29.

<sup>20</sup> Ward, xxv.

God began with creating the space to do so, and an adherence to the means consistent with this end: union with God.

The ascetic rules and practices, or means, of the Desert Fathers varied; yet keeping silence for long periods of time was a practice for many of the monks.<sup>21</sup> The desert provided the space for the early monastics to experience God in an unmediated manner, and a discipline of silence within this space was the means by which they were able to listen for God. The silence of the monastics was not merely an abstinence from words, however, but a way of being. A way of being that let what there is be what it is, without a need to control or manipulate. This silence of “simply being” has to do profoundly with God and trust.<sup>22</sup> While a rule of silence was not followed by all, a collective understanding of the power of words existed and, in some aspects, a call to use words economically and for the cultivation of life. As Isidore of Pelusia says,

To live without speaking is better than to speak without living. For the former who lives rightly does good even by his silence but the latter does no good even

---

<sup>21</sup> Chadwick notes that it is important to consider that asceticism and contemplation are not unique to Christianity. While the driving force of asceticism is the same (renunciation of success in the world) the ideal looks different in light of various religious frameworks. In one, most often associated with Hinduism, methods of meditative prayer are practiced as a means to find the divine element latent in the souls of humans. In another (associated with Buddhism) an organized institution exists to help people “achieve total liberation from the transient world and its suffering...[enabling] the individual to reach a state of undisturbed bliss” by its own powers. And the third (associated with Christianity) the individual is a member of a community where by prayer, the celebration of the sacraments; they are “brought under the control of divine grace” and “touched by a redeeming holiness” (2).

<sup>22</sup> Williams, 43.

when he speaks. When words and life correspond to one another they are together the whole of philosophy.<sup>23</sup>

The early monastics did have a high regard for scripture and the foundation of the Word on both their understanding of self, God, and other, yet they also acknowledged the absence of words was also fruitful for this same understanding. They understand that “silence was the soil in which the words of life were cultivated.”<sup>24</sup> These words of life, in turn, cultivate holiness within the community (as opposed, for instance, to words of gossip and slander). This way of being silent offers freedom from resentment and the struggle for power from one another.<sup>25</sup> Again, this demonstrates the interconnectedness of the God, neighbor and self: the *telos* of their union with God implied a union with others. It was not union in isolation, but a union to the fullness of God and all of God’s creation.

Silence served not only as a connection to God, and others, but allowed the Desert Fathers to connect with themselves. The silence of the desert revealed the “hidden motivations of the heart” and “focused the attention of the desert fathers upon moral, ascetical, and psychological questions in a particularly acute way.”<sup>26</sup> It was said of Marcarius the Great that he dismissed an assembly with the command, “Flee my brothers!” Perhaps slightly confused, one of the old men asked him, “Where could we

---

<sup>23</sup> Ward, 98.

<sup>24</sup> Burton-Christie, 136.

<sup>25</sup> Williams, 43.

<sup>26</sup> Burton-Christie, 61.



flee to beyond this desert?" Marcarius put his finger on his lips and said, 'Flee that.'<sup>27</sup> As such, silence provided "perspective with which to really see things, space in which words of genuine inspiration might arise,"<sup>28</sup> as well as served as a reflection of the transformation that has taken place within.<sup>29</sup> It is through contemplation that the mind and heart spaces remain open long enough for the mind to see "hidden material."<sup>30</sup> The seeing of this "hidden material" does not come easily, even for one in the desert.

Consider this saying,

A brother asked a hermit, "What am I to do? My thoughts will not let me sit alone in my cell for even an hour." He said, "My son, go back and stay in your cell, wash your hands, pray to God continually, turn your thoughts towards God: and let no one persuade you to go out of your cell."<sup>31</sup>

The saying continues to warn the young brother of the devil's temptations that will appear when one leaves his cell. As the brother notes, however, the distractions and temptations come not just from outside of one's self but also arise in one's own mind.

The *telos* of the monks' life in the desert was freedom. But freedom from what? In many ways, it appears they sought freedom from the anxiety of the unknown future, from the regrets of the past, and a freedom from "an attachment to the ego which

---

<sup>27</sup> Ward, 131.

<sup>28</sup> Burton-Christie, 148.

<sup>29</sup> Burton-Christie, 144.

<sup>30</sup> Rohr, 34.

<sup>31</sup> Ward, Benedicta, *The Desert Fathers: Sayings of the Early Christian Monks* (London: Penguin Books, 2003), 66.

precluded intimacy with others and with God.”<sup>32</sup> Their freedom came from their ability to place themselves in a posture of dependence upon and a confidence in God. And asceticism was a means to the end. This freedom did not only come in dramatic gestures (i.e. giving willingly to thieves, forgoing food and shelter) but also in the mundaneness of ordinary days, routine things. It was a freedom to see the fullness of God in each moment.

Consider Ammonas, disciple of St. Antony. It is told that he went down to a river to cross and happened about a ferry boat ready to go and sat in it. As Ammonas was waiting, another boat arrived and the men on the boat offered him a ride. Ammonas responded that he would only cross on a public vessel, and then grabbed a handful of palm branches, sat back down. He waited, weaving and unweaving the palms as he waited. When he finally crossed over, some of the brethren asked him why he acted as he did. Ammonas said to them, “So as to walk without any anxiety of spirit.” That is an example; we must walk in the way of God in peace.”<sup>33</sup>

It may seem odd to think of perfection as a means to freedom, as our modern association with seeking perfection comes with a sense of restriction, or a sense of never being satisfied with anything. The early monastics understood, however, that to be a “perfect human being, a human being the way God intends human beings to be, is to be

---

<sup>32</sup> Burton-Christie, 222.

<sup>33</sup> Ward, *The Sayings*, 27.

a fully loving person.”<sup>34</sup> This love has a space to grow within us “only as each of us learns to recognize, root out, or discipline within ourselves the conglomerate of obsessive emotions, attitudes, desires, and ways of acting that the monastics called “the passions.””<sup>35</sup> The passions block and blind our love of God, self and others. Common names for these passions were: gluttony, avarice, impurity, depression, anger, acedia, vainglory, and pride.<sup>36</sup> Naming the passions as such easily inflates our understanding of sin as something that manifests itself in grand ways. The monastics understood, however, that most of us are not done in by our great passions, but it is the “little things we do over a long period of time that form character and make our relationship with ourselves, others, and God what they are.”<sup>37</sup>

According to Bondi, love is the goal for the Christian life, and the means by which this goal is attained is through humility. It is the cultivation of humility that counters the passions. This humility came through introspection and self-reflection, and developing an “empathy with the weaknesses of others that made it impossible to judge

---

<sup>34</sup> Bondi, 17.

<sup>35</sup> Bondi, 57. A basic understanding of an ancient model of psychology is helpful here. An assumption existed that the person was composed of a body and a mind. Furthermore, this mind is at times further divided into soul (force that animates body) and spirit (thinking, feeling, consciousness of body). While the mind is limited in ways that are sometimes in our control and sometimes not, there is an inseparable link between the two (Bondi, 62., ff.)

<sup>36</sup> Bondi, 71-76.

<sup>37</sup> Bondi, 76.

others out of our own self-righteousness."<sup>38</sup> Humility is what enables us to distinguish between "legalism and love...it puts heart into truthfulness."<sup>39</sup> Consider this saying:

They said of an old man that he went on fasting for seventy weeks, eating a meal only once a week. He asked of God the meaning of a text of the holy Scriptures and God did not reveal it to him. So he said to himself: "Here I am: I have worked so hard and profited nothing. I will go to my brother and ask him." Just as he had shut his door on the way out, an angel of the Lord was sent to him; and the angel said: "The seventy weeks of your fast have not brought you near to God; but now you are humbled and going to your brother, I have been sent to show you the meaning of the text." And he explained to him what he had asked, and went away.<sup>40</sup>

The early monastics understood that it is only as we "learn to love God and others do we gain real freedom and autonomy in a society in which most people live in a state of slavery to their own needs and desires."<sup>41</sup> Desiring this freedom paired with the goal of perfect love that pushes the monastics to their practices of asceticism. They understood that to escape their passions in their pursuit of this perfect love required a new habituation of humility. Humility was the means to this holiness and the asceticism was the means by which they shaped their heart to reflect this humility as the "purpose of any kind of asceticism is to challenge and overcome in ourselves whatever makes us an obstacle to the connection between God and the neighbor."<sup>42</sup>

---

<sup>38</sup> Bondi, 18.

<sup>39</sup> Bondi, 19.

<sup>40</sup> Ward, *The Desert Fathers*, 166.

<sup>41</sup> Bondi, 10.

<sup>42</sup> Williams, 32.

We move now to look at contemporary of the Desert Fathers, Augustine, to gain a clearer understanding of time as it relates to this union to God in perfect love. We will see that paired with the patterning of the heart through asceticism there is an expansion of the heart (or soul) in its capacity for communion with God. This expansion has less to do with habituation, and more to do with a deeper understanding of time and memory. As Augustine says in his *Homilies on the First Epistle of John*:

The entire life of a Christian is holy desire. What you desire, however, you don't yet see. By desiring you are made large enough so that, when the time comes that you are able to see, you will be filled. For, if you wish to fill a purse and you know how great the amount is that will be given you, you stretch and extend [*extendus*] the size of the purse...In this way God extends our desire by delaying and extends our soul by desiring, and by extending it makes our soul capacious. (4.6)

## 1.2 Time and Memory

Though he did not flee to the desert himself, Augustine was heavily influenced by his contemporaries and found great instruction from St. Antony (Conf. 23.6.14). Similarly to his contemporaries, Augustine sought to live an ascetic life as a means to connect with God. Like the Desert Fathers, for Augustine asceticism is always a means to an end, and it is instrumental to contemplation.<sup>43</sup> Rather than focus on his particular practice of asceticism, however, we will instead take a deeper look as to Augustine's thoughts on time and memory. His framework will set the stage for issues of "embodied presence in the present" that we will explore in subsequent chapters.

---

<sup>43</sup> Chadwick, 1-11.

When pressed to define what time is, many of us would probably respond the same as Augustine: “Provided that no one asks, I know. If I want to explain to an inquirer, I do not now.” This does not deter Augustine from his search of understanding, nor does it keep him from making certain assertions regarding time and to do so with confidence: “I confidently affirm myself to know that if nothing passes away, there is no past time and if nothing arrives, there is no future time, and if nothing existed there would be no present time” (Conf. 11.14.17).

Augustine is not the first to enter into the waters of temporal discernment and he is very much influenced by thinkers who have gone before him. He aligns himself with the Platonists, Aristotelians, and Stoics in the sense that they affirm that for the human mind, the question of “what time consists of” is unanswerable. Augustine’s investigation of time, however, is more theological than it is philosophical as he seeks to understand the state of the human soul as it relates to God and time. He understands time is an experience of the soul and between our past and future events our soul is distended into eternity.<sup>44</sup> As befuddled as Augustine is on how to measure time, he does not see time as merely an abstraction of our minds.

---

<sup>44</sup> Though Augustine understood the soul to be distinct from the body, yet at the same time, intricately connected to the body. As one author states, if you were to create a definition of soul from his various teachings, you might expect to find the following: “the human soul is a living, incorporeal, spiritual, rational substance which is vitally and potentially present in the body as the principle of all its operations.” O’Connor, William Patrick, *The Concept of the Human Soul According to Saint Augustine* (Catholic University of America, 1921), 46.

It is important to place Augustine's assessment of time through a grasping of his *telos*. Unlike Plato, Aristotle, and Plotinus, Augustine was not attempting to explain time away. Augustine explained the time process itself and as such, he was the first thinker to take time seriously.<sup>45</sup> As stated, Augustine's treatment of time is primarily theological, and the basis his preoccupation with measurement of time stems from his interests in preserving the primacy of the Word in creating and sustaining all things.<sup>46</sup> Time is not part of some primordial soup, but comes from the Word, who is beyond time. Moreover, given that human beings are embodied, our experience of time is vastly different than that of our creator.

It has been said of God that, "God's center is everywhere, God's circumference is nowhere."<sup>47</sup> The suggestion of this divine immensity indicates that God both "transcends all spatial relations, while remaining their cause and grounds."<sup>48</sup> This line of thinking is not merely tested by reason alone, but by Scripture (Job 38:18, Isaiah 40:12-14). Humans, on the other hand, live within the bounds of time, as we are embodied creatures and our physicality keeps our bodies grounded in the present.

---

<sup>45</sup> Hausheer, Herman. "St. Augustine's Conception of Time." *The Philosophical Review*, Vol. 46, No. 5 (Sep., 1937), 511-512.

<sup>46</sup> Thompson, Christopher J., "The Theological Dimension of time in *Confessions* XI." *Augustine: Presbyter Factus Sum*, Lienhard, Joseph T., Earl C. Muller, and Roland J. Teske (eds.) (New York: P. Lang, 1993), 188.

<sup>47</sup> Bonaventure, *Classics of Western Spirituality* (Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist Press, 1978), 69.

<sup>48</sup> Oden, Thomas, *The Living God: Systematic Theology, Vol. 1.*, (New York: HarperCollins, 1987), 59.

In her book *Once out of Nature*, philosopher Andrea Nightingale uses the metaphor of time zones to explain how it is that we, as embodied humans, dwell in time. Similar to Augustine, she asserts that humans occupy two time zones: earthly time and psychic time.<sup>49</sup> Her move to earthly and psychic time terminology is an attempt to move beyond the standard focus on the “objective” and “subjective” when scholars speak of time. Psychic time is used to refer to Augustine’s assertion that “the mind distends away from the present into the past and the future via memory and expectation,” while earthly time refers to “aging and changing of bodies in the natural world as the seasons pass.”<sup>50</sup> In this reframing, Nightingale helps us understand that as the mind distends from the present, the present is not simply an abstraction. Rather, the mind distends from the presence of one’s physical body.<sup>51</sup>

Yet, simply because our bodies are bound to the present does not imply that our minds do the same.

The distention of the mind pulls humans away from self-presence: we cannot coincide with ourselves. This gives us a sense of being out of nature. Yet, because we have earthly bodies, we are a part of nature. As beings living in two different time zones, we are both in and out of nature....Augustine’s goal is to transcend both earthly time and psychic time and enjoy the eternal God.<sup>52</sup>

---

<sup>49</sup> Nightingale, Andrea Wilson, *Once out of Nature: Augustine on Time and the Body* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago, 2011), 22.

<sup>50</sup> Nightingale, 56.

<sup>51</sup> Nightingale, 57.

<sup>52</sup> Nightingale, 104.



Augustine understands that while our minds (or souls) are free to wander into the realities of past and future, our bodies prevent us from fully leaving the present moment, we possess an “embod[ied] soul that is doubly temporalized.”<sup>53</sup> This creates in us a state of *distentio*, a stretching of the mind in diverse directions that is a “painful and anxious experience” (Conf. 11.16.33). For Augustine *distentio* is a “longing and striving that characterize his search for time and temporality itself,” and it is, at the same time, a “yearning not distinguishable from his desire to be close to God.”<sup>54</sup>

On one hand, Augustine’s focus on the distention of time seems to side him in some form of “solipsistic subjectivism” (i.e., that past and future have only a reality insofar as a “present past,” a “present present,” and a “present future” and anything beyond that exists only in our minds).<sup>55</sup> Yet, at the same time, Augustine argues that time is co-created with parts of creation that are “ontologically prior to the creation of human minds.”<sup>56</sup> In other words, it is God who created time; it is not simply (nor is it possible for it to be) a projection of our minds. Moreover, the present moment is not simply a “meeting” of the past and the future; rather, the past and the future are but are “tensed modalities of the present itself.”<sup>57</sup>

---

<sup>53</sup> Nightingale, 21.

<sup>54</sup> Brown, 122.

<sup>55</sup> Futch, Michael, *Augustine on the Successiveness of Time* in *Augustinian Studies* Vol. 33, Issue 1 (Atlanta: Emory University, 2002), 23.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Crites, Stephen, “The Narrative Quality of Experience” in *Why Narrative: Readings in Narrative Theology*. Hauweras, Stanley and L. Gregory Jones, ed., (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1997), 78.

For Augustine this understanding of time was intimately connected to our understanding of memory. Though he uses the metaphor of a “storehouse,” which he describes as “a remote interior place, and yet not a place” (Conf. 10.9.3), this imagery is not to imply that memory is simply a container; rather, Augustine understands memory to be a process: memory is when I come upon myself as I recall what, where and when anything was done by me, together with my state of mind at the time (Conf. 10.8.45). Memory exists not simply as an episodic or factual reminder, but in re-membering. It is this re-membering that we engage in a process that connects us to greater narratives, and thus we become members of something greater than ourselves (Conf. 10.9-12).

This “re-membering” is process intricately connected with time. Though others had written of memory before, Augustine was the first to relate memory an essential role in creating self-knowledge and personal continuity. In many respects, Augustine saw memory as the basis of culture.<sup>58</sup> Moreover, he distinguished memories as not merely being a reliving of an episode, but also the act of fitting this episode into a schema or narrative that already existed in the mind.<sup>59</sup> The act of remembering is distinct from mere recollection, as in remembering we are placing ourselves with in this pre-existent narrative.

---

<sup>58</sup> Stock, Brian, *Augustine the Reader: Meditation, Self-Knowledge and the Ethics of Interpretation* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1996), 16.

<sup>59</sup> Stock, 13.

It is in Augustine's treatment of memory that he introduces us to the idea of two different kinds of attention: *intentio* and *attentio*. In the same way we substitute "distention" for *distentio*, it might be tempting to simply substitute the English words "intention" and "attention" as we think of these concepts; however, "intention" does not quite fully capture the meaning of *intentio*.<sup>60</sup> As an alternative to "intention", Nightingale offers the phrase "active-attention." Therefore, we can understand *intentio* to be the act of transferring future expectations into memories.<sup>61</sup> *Intentio* is an "active and deliberate mode of attention that focuses on future plans and expectations," it is the mind's "stretching towards an object."<sup>62</sup>

In some respects, *intentio* could initially be seen as an antidote to anxiety producing distention. Yet, while *intentio* "gathers disordered memories in its effort to construct a plan or an action that involves concentrated focus...it does not overcome distention; rather it offers a more coherent experience of time."<sup>63</sup> *Intentio* can direct and concentrate the mind, but cannot overcome distention; only God can and will do this at the end of time.<sup>64</sup> This does not mean, however, that humans cannot use *intentio* as a tool to stay the mind on God and work against distractions and interruptions. In doing so we may experience, for brief periods, a reduction in the feeling of being "scattered and torn

---

<sup>60</sup> Nightingale, 86.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Nightingale, 63.

<sup>63</sup> Nightingale, 99.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

apart in time.”<sup>65</sup> An example of this would be the practice of meditation, where the aim of meditation is union with God through a quieting of the mind. Augustine claims that a “mature and devout Christian can detach himself from the physical world for a short period of time and get a glimpse of God (turning from physical vision to spiritual vision). But, as he admits, this is a rare event in any life.”<sup>66</sup>

Part of the reason *intentio* cannot fully serve as an antidote for *distentio* is that our resistance to living in the present runs deeper than mere distraction. For Augustine, *distentio* is not simply a distraction from the present moment, but is a coping mechanism used to keep us from admitting our own mortality. The fact that “humans are aware of time passing makes them hate the temporal, no doubt because they can anticipate aging, loss, death, and the decaying corpse in the future.”<sup>67</sup> Thus, even as we long to experience the eternity of God, when we brush up against God’s eternity we are forced to acknowledge our own mortality. All efforts of *intentio* will be fraught with failure until we come to a place of acceptance of our own mortality.

The true antidote to *distentio*, claims Augustine, is *exentio*. Similar to *distentio*, *exentio* is also a stretching of the soul, but rather than a thinning of the soul it is an expansion of the soul. This expansion is outward focus, away from the psyche and towards the wholeness of God. Augustine echoes the words of Paul in the third chapter

---

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Nightingale, 113.

<sup>67</sup> Nightingale, 114.

of Philippians, who also speaks of being stretched, when he says: "leaving behind the old days I might be gathered to follow the One, 'forgetting the past' and moving not towards those future things which are transitory but to 'the things which are before' me." In other words, "not stretched out in distraction but extended in reach, being pulled apart by concentration" (Conf. 11.24.39). One scholar translates this as "not stretched apart (*distentus*) into things in the future or things passed away, but stretched forth (*extentus*) not according to distraction (*distention*) but according to attentive thought (*intention*). Both *distentio* and *exentio* are stretching; one is a thinning from distraction and the other is an expansion from attention; one brings anxiety while the other brings hope.

We see here again, the significance of means and ends. With *exentio* the end is a connection with God who transcends time, whereas *distentio* is a clinging to the past or anxiety of the future. "Distention tears the mind away from self-presence and divine presence, while extension opens the soul to the experience of God's eternal presence."<sup>68</sup> Rather than the soul "thinning" as it pulled to the future and to the past, the soul expands into fullness as it pushes outward to the fullness of God.

Extensio, in comparison with *distentio*, is a movement of hope not anxiety, a hope of finding a home in God. The act of *exentio* is also a stretching of the mind, but it is stretching of the mind that is "to be gathered in and redirected into a stretching-forth,

---

<sup>68</sup> Nightingale, 100.

out of time into the contemplation of eternal delights neither yet to come nor ever to pass away.”<sup>69</sup> Hope works “against *distentio* by extending the soul toward eternity. Holding to this hope is crucial as we live in earthly time as though our souls cannot overcome distention, “hope moves the individual outward toward God.”<sup>70</sup> And, as Nightingale, reminds us, “God offers humans a boundless hope rather than a finite expectation.”<sup>71</sup>

Our bend towards *distentio* comes from our desires. These desires most often reflect a sense of lack or loss, and the memory of this loss that prompts our soul to seek out filling the emptiness.<sup>72</sup> Human’s fall from divine presence (in the Garden of Eden) created an a whole slew of desires that pull us “away from God” and the “very experience of desire conjures of a feeling of lack.”<sup>73</sup> As Augustine rightly asserts, what we truly lack is both divine presence, and self-presence.<sup>74</sup> Until we can understand this longing, we live in a perpetual state of distention. Or, as Augustine aptly prays, “our hearts our restless until they rest in you alone.” (Conf. 1.1)

*Exentio* is ultimately about creating space or capacity in our souls for God. It is a space that is not pulled to the past or the future, yet it is not disconnected from either. Rather, *exentio* is rooted in the deep memory of union we have with God and the hope

---

<sup>69</sup> Brann, Eva T.H., *What, Then, Is Time?* (Boston: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001), 124.

<sup>70</sup> Nightingale, 100.

<sup>71</sup> Nightingale, 101.

<sup>72</sup> Nightingale, 60.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> Nightingale, 61.

we have to return to this perfect union. *Extentio*, in some respects, connects to what philosophical theologian Stephen Crites refers to as “sacred story.” Sacred stories are narratives in which people live within, or as he calls them, “dwelling-places.”<sup>75</sup> They orient our beings, and this orientation often comes as we awaken to the sacred story in which we find ourselves.<sup>76</sup> This awakening is not merely a matter of cognitive understanding however, as sacred stories “live...in the arms and the bellies of the celebrants.”<sup>77</sup> The stories themselves form our consciousness, rather than simply being the object of our consciousness.<sup>78</sup> In the Eucharist we are not merely recollecting what Christ did on the cross, but in our partaking of the bread and the cup we are participating in the ongoing narrative of the Christ’s life, death and resurrection. In the same manner, in baptism we are reorienting ourselves not simply to the claim that God has on us now, but we, too, are claiming the identity that we have in Christ now while binding ourselves to the “patient, long-term discovery of what grace will do with us.”<sup>79</sup>

Augustine understands that the penultimate antidote to our distension exists in fullness of time, when Christ returns to draw all things back to himself. Augustine does not believe, however, that we are simply to settle for living in a constant state of distention. Rather, in practicing “active attention” we are able to fully join ourselves to

---

<sup>75</sup> Crites, 70.

<sup>76</sup> Crites, 71.

<sup>77</sup> Crites, 69.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> Williams, 67.

the presence of God in the present. Augustine imagines his final “fusion with God as a transformation of his scattered soul and mortal body into a liquid substance that flows into divine unity.”<sup>80</sup> While the image of becoming “liquefied” may be off-putting to some, one can take comfort in imagining this unification to God. While we could be quick to blame our current anxious distention on the forces of technology, it is important to note that as Augustine languished over human’s inability to maintain an active attention, he noted the difficulty to do so simply by the nature of our own restless minds.

The communities that the early monastics founded were not meant to be an “alternative to human solidarity but a radical version of it that questions the priorities of community in other contexts.”<sup>81</sup> Attentiveness to God, one’s self, and others is not something that came naturally for the early Christians, but they were wise enough to recognize the need to cultivate practices and habits toward that end. At present, we seem to have forgotten the need for attentiveness, and this is to say nothing of the ever multiplying pulls on our attention in the present day, pulls that we will investigate in the next chapter. What the early Church continued to hold at the forefront of their minds was consideration of what courses of action, “fully resonate with the kind of life Christ

---

<sup>80</sup> Nightingale, 57.

<sup>81</sup> Williams, 33.



lived and lives” and what actions open up “more possibilities for God to work?”<sup>82</sup> They understood that while there may not necessarily be one clear answer to these questions, simply the process of reflecting and discerning “makes space in [us] for the life of Christ and the creative movement of God.”<sup>83</sup> The creation of this space is the *exentio* that Augustine speaks of, the expansion of the soul to communion with God. What this *exentio* looks like in our current cultural understanding of space, place, time and memory is the direction toward which we will now turn our attention.

---

<sup>82</sup> Williams, 61.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

## **2. Where are we now? Current Technological Landscape**

“To be everywhere is to be nowhere.”<sup>84</sup> (Seneca)

“We’re not bowling alone, but texting our friends, seeing who’s available, sending the electronic invitation, and waiting for people to show up, scheduling another time because someone can’t make it and maybe, if we’re lucky, actually getting to bowl.”<sup>85</sup> (Bernie Hogan, Sociologist)

As we walked into the college volleyball game, the student next to me let out a chortle and ducked a bit out of the way as we passed by a young man. I asked her if she knew him and she replied that no, she didn’t know him. But she informed me that she had become Facebook Friends with him a couple nights before and now knew a lot *about* him (and, presumably, he now knew a lot more about her). After a few moments of silence she then commented, “All Facebook has done is made the real world a lot more awkward.”

This was in 2008 when Facebook was still in its infancy stage. The idea of gaining “Friends,” posting “Status Updates” and uploading endless pictures of all that happened the night before was still a novelty to many of its users. These were the days when “Poking” someone on Facebook was common place, and when you logged on all you were asked was to fill in a text box in order to answer the question, “what are you

---

<sup>84</sup> Seneca, *Letters from a Stoic* (London: Penguin Books, 1969), 33.

<sup>85</sup> Rainie, Lee, and Berry Wellman, *Networked: The New Social Operating System* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2012), 57.

doing?” Being new to Facebook myself, I didn’t have much insight to offer these students except to concur that yes, yes “Facebook World” was uncharted territory. Interestingly, in my five years as a college chaplain, while I didn’t see a change in Facebook usage, I did notice a fundamental change in how students thought about “Facebook World.” The Digital Natives had grown up and found their way into college, and there was no longer a distinction between “Facebook World” and the “Real World.” All of it was their world.

## 2.1 Space and Place

In 2005 sample survey of students from the University of Michigan and American University revealed that students sent and received an average of 10 or 12 texts daily.<sup>86</sup> In that same year, Pew Research revealed that given a choice of technologies for communicating with friends, 24% of American teenagers chose IM, while 51% preferred landline phones, 12% opted for voice calls on mobile phones, 5% selected email, and only 3% chose text messaging.<sup>87</sup>

Writing in 2005, Naomi Baron, author of *Always On: Language in an Online and Mobile World*, stated, “even if texting volume in the United States grows in the future, the

---

<sup>86</sup>Baron, Naomi, *Always On: Language in an Online and Mobile World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 142-144.

<sup>87</sup> Lenhart, Amanda, Mary Madden, and Paul Hitlin, *Teens and Technology: Youth are leading the transition to being a fully wired and mobile nation* (Washington D.C.: Pew Research Center, 2005). [http://www.pewinternet.org/files/old-media/Files/Reports/2005/PIP\\_Teens\\_Tech\\_July2005web.pdf.pdf](http://www.pewinternet.org/files/old-media/Files/Reports/2005/PIP_Teens_Tech_July2005web.pdf.pdf) , accessed March 1, 2014.

amount of talking will not necessarily diminish.”<sup>88</sup> She based this claim on the number of minutes that most students had on their phones, believing there would be “no reason for increased texting to diminish voice-call traffic.”<sup>89</sup> A 2012 study by the Pew Research Center however revealed the following:

- 26% of all teens (including those with and without cell phones) say they talk daily with friends on their cell phone, down from 38% of teens in 2009.
- 63% of teens communicate daily via text, with the average amount of daily texts *sent* (not taking into account text received) being 60 texts per person.<sup>90</sup>

As noted, things change.

While now a primary form of communication, texting initially developed as an afterthought. In the 1990s a multinational European effort known as Groupe Spécial Mobile (GSM) established a uniform mobile telephone system for much of Europe. Over time this network has expanded to include other regions of the world and now GSM has come to mean “Global System for Mobile Telecommunications.”<sup>91</sup> The GSM was originally developed to convey voice signals over network; however, as the project neared completion there was a bit of leftover bandwidth. Rather than waste this bandwidth, GSM used it to create a Short Messaging Service (SMS), which allowed

---

<sup>88</sup> Baron, 143.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

<sup>90</sup> Lenhart, Amanda, *Teens, Texting & Smartphones* (Washington D.C.: Pew Research Center, May 2012) <http://pewinternet.org/Reports/2012/Teens-and-smartphones.aspx>, accessed February 26, 2014.

<sup>91</sup> Baron, 16.

customers to type out simple messages on the phone keypad.<sup>92</sup> Little did they know that this afterthought would evolve to become one of the most favored modes of communication among many.<sup>93</sup>

Though it would be a few years before SMS evolved to the prime space in communication forms, teenagers and young adults quickly became heavy users of the service. The primary reason: economics. The cost to send an SMS was much lower than that of voice calls; as a result, it became a popular medium for those whose funds were often limited (i.e. young people).<sup>94</sup> What was once used on a limited basis, however, has become a primary form of communication as Pew Research indicating that 97% of all adults use texting on a daily basis.<sup>95</sup>

Interestingly, Pew has also found correlation between the amount of time teens spend with voice calls and texting. Teens who send higher amounts of texts are also the ones who make the most voice calls in a week. And, while the Web offers endless opportunities of people with whom to make connections, most social networking sites are increasingly used to keep up with close social ties and the average user of a social networking site has more close ties and is half as likely to be socially isolated as the

---

<sup>92</sup> Baron, 17.

<sup>93</sup> 2012 Pew Research indicates that 97% of all adults use texting on a daily basis. <http://www.pewresearch.org/daily-number/texting-is-nearly-universal-among-young-adult-cell-phone-owners/> accessed March 10, 2014.

<sup>94</sup> Baron, 17.

<sup>95</sup> <http://www.pewresearch.org/daily-number/texting-is-nearly-universal-among-young-adult-cell-phone-owners/> (Washington D.C.: Pew Research Center, December 2012) accessed March 10, 2014.

average American. In other words; social networking spaces are simply serving as a new space for people to interact with the same people.

Microsoft Principal Researcher danah boyd exposes an important point in her book, *It's Complicated: The Social Lives of Networked Teens* as we consider the shifts in this generation's modes of communicating with each other. She notes that while the manner in which they communicate with one another (i.e. Snapchat, texting, Facebook) is changing the reason they are doing so is the same: they want to connect and socialize with their friends.<sup>96</sup> In other words, "People are not hooked on gadgets—they are hooked on each other."<sup>97</sup> Again, the pace in which conversations switched networked spaces is mindboggling: between February 2005 and August 2006, the use of social networking sites among young adult internet users ages 18-29 jumped from 9% to 49%.<sup>98</sup> The rise in social networked spaces is correlated with the rise in mobile phones, and understandably so. No longer does one have to log on to a stationary computer to access these spaces, as they are usually no more than a finger swipe away.

While the idea of using technology to consistently communicate via social media, social networks are not a new phenomenon; sociologists have been referring to "social networks" for the past century and it was in the 1950s the term "social network" began

---

<sup>96</sup> boyd, danah, *It's Complicated: The Social Lives of Networked Teens* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2014), introduction.

<sup>97</sup> Rainie and Wellman, 6.

<sup>98</sup> <http://www.pewinternet.org/fact-sheets/social-networking-fact-sheet/> (Washington D.C.: Pew Research Center, 2013), 8, 2014.

to be used systematically to describe, “patterns of ties that cut across bounded groups and social categories.”<sup>99</sup> What is different about today’s “networked operating system” is not only that it gives people new ways to solve problems and meet social needs, it allows people to cross barriers of space and time. Social networks seem to offer more freedom to individuals than people experienced in the past because now they have more “room to maneuver and more capacity to act on their own.”<sup>100</sup>

In her book, *Hello Avatar*, Beth Coleman describes our current technological landscape as “X-reality” or “pervasive media.”<sup>101</sup> She claims that X-reality “marks the variable spaces, places, and temporalities in which a network society exists, calling for an expanded vision of what comprises one’s world”<sup>102</sup> and argues that as “networked subjects we desire more, not less, contact and we like to have multiple channels through which we can send our message.”<sup>103</sup> There is, she argues, no longer a distinction between “real life” and “online life” but it has all morphed into one continuous understanding of what is real.<sup>104</sup> She notes that we all used mediated conversation, not as a means to avoid face-to-face interaction but to “maintain a pervasive presence with each other” and

---

<sup>99</sup> Rainie and Wellman, 40.

<sup>100</sup> Rainie and Wellman, 9.

<sup>101</sup> Coleman, Beth, *Hello Avatar: Rise of the Networked Generation* (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 2011), 85.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

<sup>103</sup> Coleman, 50.

<sup>104</sup> Per my anecdote on the college’s student’s assessment that “all Facebook has done is made the real world more awkward” I can attest that merely two years later students were no longer referring to “Facebook world” and “real world.” Facebook was their real world.

maintains that we can no longer claim “face-to-face experience as the exclusive site of the authentic and the real.”<sup>105</sup>

With the blurring (or extinguished) line of “real” and “virtual” comes a blurring of space and place, not only with continuum of “X-reality,” as Coleman proposes, but with what some describe as the capability of the Web as a space where the “near are brought far and the far become near.”<sup>106</sup> What he is describing is a compression of space and place, or what boyd refers to as collapsing contexts.<sup>107</sup> As our multiple “worlds” encroach on one other a whole new set of questions arise around attention and human capacity. While social networks might afford us the freedom to connect with more people, humans are still creatures who have bodily limitations: thus while I might be riding a bus and engaging in a conversation via text with my family in Michigan, I am still “present” with the person who sits next to me.

Research shows that not only is media consumption on the rise, but the consumption of multiple forms of media at the same time has increased. One study found that among those who do at least some media multitasking, young people devote

---

<sup>105</sup> Coleman, 116. To be fair, Coleman is explicit that she is not arguing for an “equivalence of lived, bodily experience with our experiences of being mediated through [media],” but rather for “recognition of porous spheres of engagement that meet across a continuum of the actual” (36).

<sup>106</sup> Hipps, Shane, *Flickering Pixels: How Technology Shapes Your Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009), 107.

<sup>107</sup> boyd, 33.



about a quarter of their media time to more than one medium.<sup>108</sup> Admittedly, multitasking is nothing new, and has been the topic of much research. Moreover, as Baron points out, “multitasking—making simultaneous demands upon our cognitive or physical faculties—is a common enough necessity in everyday life.”<sup>109</sup>

What we cannot seem to understand, however, is that effectiveness in multitasking is a myth. In other words, while I can carry on a voice conversation, while texting multiple people in the midst of scrolling through my Twitter feed (all on my WMD) this does not mean that I am cognitively able to effectively split my attention. What we perceive to be “multi-tasking” is actually our brain switching back and forth between tasks. This is particularly taxing when the tasks (i.e. carrying on multiple conversations via our smartphones while attempting to study for an upcoming test) activate the same regions of our brains.<sup>110</sup>

While certain neurologists hypothesize that as we gain more experience in rapidly shifting our attention, we may overcome some of the inefficiencies inherent in multitasking, the gains are often less than would be achieved with significant focus. Put plainly, except in “rare circumstances” you can “train until you are blue in the face and

---

<sup>108</sup> Foer, Ulla G. *Media Multitasking Among American Youth: Prevalence, Predictors and Pairings*, (The Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation, December 2006) <http://kff.org/other/media-multitasking-among-american-youth-prevalence-predictors/> accessed March 8, 2014.

<sup>109</sup> Baron, 37.

<sup>110</sup> Foer, 4. Most information processing theories suggest that there is a limit to what our brains can actually process “simultaneously” Research shows that while we can perceive two stimuli in parallel, we cannot process them simultaneously.

you'd never be as good as if you focused on one thing at time."<sup>111</sup> While many young people in particular think they can perform two challenging tasks at once, psychologist David Myers reminds us that there is "nothing magical about the brains of so-called 'digital natives' that keeps them from suffering the inefficiencies of multitasking. They may like to do it, they may even be addicted to it, but there's no getting around the fact that it's far better to focus on one task from start to finish."<sup>112</sup>

In a world of multi-media-tasking, what results is the phenomenon of "Continual Partial Attention." (CPA) has been coined as a means to describe the effect new technology has had on attentiveness.<sup>113</sup> A fundamental difference between CPA and multi-tasking is that while multi-tasking is motivated by efficiency, CPA is motivated by a desire to not miss anything. Linda Stone, the developer of the concept and terminology of CPA, explains that CPA is a "desire to connect and be connected...as to be connected is to be is to be alive, to be recognized, and to matter."<sup>114</sup> This desire, in turn, is fueled by mediums that offer the allure of constant connection and the ability to not miss

---

<sup>111</sup> David Meyer, as quoted in Carr, Nicholas, *The Shallows: What the Internet is Doing to Our Brain* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2010), 141.

<sup>112</sup> David Meyer, quoted in Annie Murphy Paul, *You'll Never Learn: Students Can't Resist Multi-Tasking*. Slate Online Magazine, May 13, 2013. [http://www.slate.com/articles/health\\_and\\_science/science/2013/05/multitasking\\_while\\_studying\\_divided\\_attention\\_and\\_technological\\_gadgets.html](http://www.slate.com/articles/health_and_science/science/2013/05/multitasking_while_studying_divided_attention_and_technological_gadgets.html) accessed March 8, 2014

<sup>113</sup> Watts, Duncan, "The HBR List: Breakthrough Ideas for 2007," *The Harvard Business Review*, July 2007 <http://hbr.org/2007/02/the-hbr-list-breakthrough-ideas-for-2007/ar/1> Accessed March 13, 2014.

<sup>114</sup> Stone, Linda, "What is Continuous Partial Attention?" <http://lindastone.net/qa/> accessed March 10, 2013.

anything. Our attachment to our WMDs has less to do with our desire to be “efficient” (the goal of multitasking) and more to do with our fear of missing out, or our desire to be continually connected.

I had the same fear of missing out when I was in younger. More often than not, this would cause me to over commit throughout the week and the weekends. My fear of missing out with was paired with my desire to “be all things to all people” and people please. If I were to be invited to two gatherings, rather than simply choose one, I would attempt to go to both (even if their times overlapped). Rather than giving me the best of both worlds, I was continually analyzing if I were in the right spot—a pre-digital Continual Partial Attention. I would spend my time at the first party paying attention to the clock and wondering when I should make my exit to the next, and upon arriving at the next I would worry that the first one was more fun and I had made the wrong choice in leaving.

And this was a best-case scenario (actually having a choice to of two things to do on a weekend night.) What about all nights when there was no invitation to be found, and I would sit in my dorm room thinking about all the fun others might be having. Yes, just as sad then as it is today. But I was not bombarded with Tweets that let me know how much fun everyone else was having as I sat and watched *Notting Hill* 3<sup>rd</sup> or 4<sup>th</sup> times that month.

The same thing happens today (sans the *Notting Hill* VHS tape). What is different, however, is the technology did not exist for me to check in on what was happening at the other party. I couldn't text my friends to get a sense for the "scene" at the other location, or receive the notification buzz of a crazy picture posted from my friends about the "best moment of our lives" that I was missing.

## **2.2 Time and Memory**

In his novel, *The Circle*, Dave Eggers explores issues of technology and what it might be like to work on the campus of one of the tech giants, a fictional firm called The Circle. One of the central themes Eggers explores is the overlap of technology and anonymity. The Circle began its rise as a firm with its creation of TruYou: a singular internet identity that is used to make purchases, email, do banking, engage in social networking sites, etc. The impetus behind the TruYou was to create more civil online discourse and have people engage in the virtual world as they would in the "real" world, thus, bringing their authentic selves to the Net.

As technology can do, however, it amplifies this idea of transparency on the Net to another level and does so quite quickly. For example, while The Circle designs microscopic cameras placed globally to give people access to live feed action around the world, they do not stop with the placement of these cameras in locales, but instead create wearable cameras in the form of necklaces or pins for people who have decided to "go transparent." The camera image is broadcasted on a live feed that anyone can

access, at any time. Thus, not only can you now check the surfing conditions at your local beach, but you can also sit in meeting rooms with your politicians or lawyers to make sure business is on the up and up, as well as head out on virtual vacation with your friends as you witness the sights of an African safari in “real time” through their live feeds.

While the idea of “going transparent” is fictional, it is also plausible enough to be disturbing. Indeed, many consider their Twitter feeds, Instagram pics, and Facebook newsfeed a means of being transparent and updating our social circles “in real time.” In his novel, Eggers takes this one step further and proposes a world in which this now is truly simultaneous. By walking the line between dystopia and utopia, Eggers presents us with future that doesn’t seem that far out of reach. Consider this passage reflecting a new employee of the The Circle attempting to keep up with her work as well as the social networking site (Zing) she is required to participate in:

“[Mae] fortified herself with an energy drink and gummy worms, and when the caffeine and sugar kicked in, she felt invincible...she pushed forward, signing up for a few hundred more Zing feeds, starting with a comment on each...she posted 33 comments on a product-test site...she looked at her left wrist to see how her body was responding, and thrilled at the sight of her pulse-rate increasing. She was in command of all this and needed more. The total number of stats she was tracking was only 41. There was her aggregate customer service score, which was 97. There was her last score, which was 99....there was the number of queries she had handled that day thus far, 221...On her second screen, there were the number of messages sent by other staffers that day, 1,192 and the number of those messages that she’d read, 239, and the number to which she’d responded, 28...There was the number of friends in her OuterCircle, 762, and outstanding requests by those wanting to be her friend, 27. There were the number of zingers she was following, 343, and the number following her, 198.

There was the number of unread zings, 887. There was the number of zingers suggested to her, 12,862.”<sup>115</sup>

While wearable live-feed necklaces may seem far-fetched for some, the persistent ding of alerts on our screens with the “latest” info is the current reality for many of us. But with such easy connection often comes the distress and anxiety of sensory overload and pressure to keep up with “the now.” As media theorist Rushkoff explains in *Present Shock*, these feeds and updates create the sense that we need to “keep up with their impossible pace lest we lose touch with the present.”<sup>116</sup> Technology has pushed our thinking to believe that catching up with wave of information would enable us to feel like we could be in the *now*. And in the “know.” This is, of course, a false goal, as the devices and feeds will forever outpace humans. Perhaps more significantly, the “real time” feeds do not represent a “here and now” that constitutes any “legitimate sort of present tense.”<sup>117</sup> Even if we were to stay glued to our Twitter feeds, for example, the Tweets merely create the illusion that we are in the present as the Tweets themselves are “mere snapshots of moments ago.”<sup>118</sup> Our attempts to keep up with the “present moment” create in us what Rushkoff calls digiphrenia (digi for “digital,” and phrenia,

---

<sup>115</sup> Eggers, Dave, *The Circle* (Toronto: Alfred A. Knopf, 2013), 193.

<sup>116</sup> Rushkoff, Douglas, *Present Shock: When Everything Happens Now* (New York: Penguin, 2013), 74.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid.

for “disordered condition of mental activity.”)<sup>119</sup> We live, in a sense, in a state of present shock. Cool. Or if we don’t we feel like we’re missing life.

Technology and cultural theorists are quick to remind us that while digiphrenia may be new, this is not the first cultural moment to contend with how technology changes humankind. What is profoundly different this time, however, is we have now entered the age when our devices are rarely out of reach, thus our digiphrenia can constantly and consistently be fed, leading to this present shock or a “chronic plateau of interminable stresses that seem to have always been there.”<sup>120</sup> Rushkoff claims that our society has “reoriented itself to the present moment in that “everything is live, real time, and always-on.”<sup>121</sup> Similar to the cultural norm of living within the present moment, present shock is a “diminishing of anything that isn’t happening right now.”<sup>122</sup> Vastly different than the cultural norm of living within the present, however, is that what is happening “now” is not dictated by being “in the moment” but “of the moment” causing us to live in a “distracted present, where forces on the periphery are magnified and those immediately before us are ignored.”<sup>123</sup>

Rushkoff contends that to combat present shock we need to be “less immediately concerned with the cause-and-effect consequences of digital activity than with the

---

<sup>119</sup> Rushkoff, 75.

<sup>120</sup> Rushkoff, 247.

<sup>121</sup> Ruskoff, 2.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid.

<sup>123</sup> Rushkoff, 4.

greater implications and requirements of living in the digital environment—it's not about how digital technology changes us, but how we change ourselves and one another now that we live so digitally."<sup>124</sup> For instance, he points out that the question is always, "Why hasn't he answered my email," and never, "when will he log on to the Internet and check the particular directory to which my text was copied."<sup>125</sup> As it is with many things, sometimes we need to step back and make sure we are asking the question before we get frustrated with the answer. We don't think to ask this question (of when a person has logged on) because we are operating under the assumption that people are always logged on.

Aside from the assault on our senses that comes from the pings and alerts, present shock is temporally destabilizing...it leads us to devalue the unbounded, ill-defined time of *kairos* for the neat, informational packets of *chronos*."<sup>126</sup> Rushkoff argues that what present shock does is "turn us from creatures led about by future expectations into more fully present-oriented human beings."<sup>127</sup> Yet, unlike the full present orientation of the monastics that was explored in the previous chapter, this "fully presented-orientation becomes more "distracted, peripheral, even schizo-phrenic than that of being fully present."<sup>128</sup> Rushkoff seems to be alluding to the disorientation of

---

<sup>124</sup> Rushkoff, 73.

<sup>125</sup> Rushkoff, 72.

<sup>126</sup> Rushkoff, 259.

<sup>127</sup> Rushkoff, 73.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid.



attentiveness that Linda Stone has coined as “Continual Partial Attention” (CPA). Stone argues that CPA is a permanent state in which we are finding ourselves. CPA is not simply that we are drawn to our devices, but it is driven by the fear that exists in us that we are missing out if we are not attentive to our devices.

We have become a culture that vastly overvalues what happens to us right now, but ironically, our quest for being up to date means we are out of touch with the now of the moment.<sup>129</sup> Again, what is different is not our infatuation with the newest and the latest, but rather that at the Net we find ourselves increasingly connected to a technology designed to feed on and intensify these desires. The Internet is embedded with “positive reinforcements” that deliver precisely the kind of repetitive, intensive, interactive, and addictive sensory and cognitive stimuli that have been shown to result in strong and rapid alterations in brain circuits and functions.<sup>130</sup>

boyd concedes that there is no doubt our brains are being rewired through mediated interactions. She reminds us, however, that cognitive science points out that “stimuli have always reworked, and are continuously reworking our brains.”<sup>131</sup> boyd, as she does throughout the book, continues to push us to think more deeply about what is happening and framing the concern with goal, or end, of engaging in new technologies. She argues that it is through engagement with social media, teens are learning to

---

<sup>129</sup> Rushkoff, 261.

<sup>130</sup> Carr, 116.

<sup>131</sup> boyd, 92.

“understand a deeply networked and intertwined world.”<sup>132</sup> And again, while the technologies are new, children have long embraced new technologies to learn and this is confusing to adults who “relish the environments with which they are familiar and in which they had opportunities to learn.”<sup>133</sup>

I concur with boyd in her assessment that the rewiring of our brains is not something to be alarmed by, but rather something to be understood. At the same time, however, we cannot discount the fact that the tools which we are now using to understand this deeply networked work, are tools that create the sense (and the desire) that we can be connected at all times. Media theorist Marshall McLuhan is famed for coining the phrase, “the medium is the message.”<sup>134</sup> He was the first to point out that it is less the content of the media that shapes us and more the medium by which we consume it. This means, in theory, that checking an email on our smartphone has a different effect on us than checking on our desktop. Reading on an e-reader is inherently different than reading a book with a spine and pages to turn. Again, what is different is not our infatuation with the newest and the latest, but rather that at the Net we find ourselves increasingly connected to a technology designed to feed on and amplify our

---

<sup>132</sup> boyd, 92.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid.

<sup>134</sup> McLuhan, Marshall, *Understanding Media: The Extension of Man* (Cambridge, MA: 1994), 60.

desire for more connection. As Nicholas Carr says in *The Shallows*, the Internet is gathers our attention simply to scatter it.<sup>135</sup>

The hyperlinked text of the Net doesn't simply scatter our attention, but it creates the illusion that everything is connected. Present shock provides the perfect "cultural and emotional pretext for apocalyptic thinking" as it is destabilizing; it destructs the narratives we use to make meaning; it leads us to compulsively overwind; it leads us to draw paranoid connections where there are none; and finally, its lack of regard for beginnings and endings—its focus on the perpetual now—drives us to impose order on chaos."<sup>136</sup> Yet, Rushkoff points out, that the culpability of the Net is less about the proliferation of this apocalyptic thinking, and more about the ease in which it "connects everything to almost everything else."<sup>137</sup> Moreover, as noted, these connections are never far from reach as many people are never more than an arm's length away from Net access. Our constant attentiveness to our feeds and inboxes stretches our sense of time, it is no wonder that we are ratcheted up to be more anxious and feel scattered. Ironically, to distill our anxiety we turn to the very tools that are the culprits of this distension.

As our communication technologies have advanced in speed, access, and ease of use the overall affect has been to create a culture that is perpetually tethered not simply to their devices, but the ubiquitous present moment. While the technologies offer an

---

<sup>135</sup> Carr, 118.

<sup>136</sup> Rushkoff, 251

<sup>137</sup> Rushkoff, 199.

endless connectivity, our physical bodies do not have the capacity to keep up. The intention of many of these technologies was to create more efficient means of accessing information and communication, with the hopes that we would have more time for “leisure.” The reality, however, paints quite a different picture, as rather than more moments of leisure we have created a culture that is so addicted to the “now” times of wonder and leisure are often intruded upon by an insatiable desire to be connected to the “now.”

Most people do not have the ability to predict what type of technology we will be fast with in the future. In the same way today’s college students do not have anyone to help them answer the question of how to navigate social media while in college, today’s students will have a whole new set of technological tools and platforms for social communication platforms.<sup>138</sup> If predictors are right, wearable technology (i.e. Google Glass) will be commonplace by the time today’s students have college students of their own and some go as far as to predict that embedded technologies will be the new norm in the not so distant future. Our inability to predict specific technologies indicates that rather than focus on the means of engagement with specific technologies, perhaps we ought to keep our focus on the end: what kind of people do we desire to become and how does this square with what kind of people we are becoming?

---

<sup>138</sup> This is to say nothing of needing to navigate growing questions of bioethics, robotics, and wearable technology (i.e. Google Glass).

### **3. Where are we headed?**

“As St. Anthony was relaxing one day, a hunter came by and rebuked him. Anthony said, ‘Bend your bow and shoot an arrow,’ and he did. ‘Bend it again and shoot another’, and he did. He did this again, and again until the hunter said, ‘Father, if I keep my bow always stretched it will break.’ ‘So it is with the monk,’ replied Anthony, “if we push ourselves beyond measure we will break; it is right for us from time to time to relax our efforts.”<sup>139</sup>

The conversation was quite benign until Brandon spoke up: “But that's what's great about texting, I can walk away in the middle of an argument and later claim my phone ran out of battery or my mom called and I had to take the call.” Few of the other college students in the room balked at the idea of having an argument via text; indeed, most nodded their heads in agreement as he talked. But it was Brandon's concluding comment that riled up the room: “It's perfect,” he declared, “because now I don't have to deal with all the drama that the ladies bring to the relationship.” While the young men in the room slapped high-fives and gave Brandon the equivalent of a hearty, “Amen,” in the form of fist-bumps, the women were not quite as amused.

Interestingly, these young women were less concerned with his hypothetical actions (i.e., “walking” away in the middle of an argument with a lie) than they were about being classified as dramatic. I jumped in to ask some clarifying questions. Yes, I learned, they had all at some point had an argument with someone via text. Yes, they collectively responded, texting is an appropriate form of communication for everything

---

<sup>139</sup> Ward, xxiii.

from asking whether someone wanted to meet up at the dining hall, to asking someone on a date. Yes, texting was more “convenient than face to face conversations” because it seemed to offer them what they wanted in the exchange: control. And finally, yes, they all hoped to be married someday.

“Wait, what does marriage have to do with this conversation?”

As I asked the question of whether they pictured themselves married someday, I could see their puzzled looks. Then I took their own logic and asked them this: “so if you and your spouse get into an argument, rather than talking face to face you are going to grab your phones and text about it? “Of course not!” they responded, “that would be crazy.” Crazy indeed.

What the group failed to understand was that their current means of communication (i.e. habitual texting) did not match up with their end (i.e. desire for unmediated resolution with their (hypothetical) spouse). Moreover, we fail to realize given the ease with which we interface with the world via our smartphones, it is not merely that we are conforming to the world, but that we are creating new worlds. We neglect to consider that our habits not only are an action performed, but they have an effect on how we are formed; what we are repeating, and how we are repeating is significant in our formation as humans.<sup>140</sup>

---

<sup>140</sup> Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom: How Worship Works (Cultural Liturgies)*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academics, 2013), 183.

As James K. A. Smith notes in *Imagining the Kingdom*, to become “habituated to an iPhone is to implicitly treat the world as “available” to *me* and at my disposal...to be selected, scaled, scanned, tapped, and enjoyed.”<sup>141</sup> Smith refers to this as the “iPhone-ization of the world” which shapes how we relate to the world and where we place ourselves in the world: at the center.<sup>142</sup> Our decision to engage with the world via our smartphones is not a neutral decision, but one that “inculcates in us certain habits that then shape our orientation to the world.”<sup>143</sup> The “seemingly innocuous “manners” of a society extort what is essential by commanding what seems insignificant...what might appear to be inconsequential micro habits are, in fact, disciplinary formations that begin to reconfigure our relation to the wider world—indeed, they begin to *make* that world.”<sup>144</sup> Rather than settle for our identity as image bearers, we begin to see ourselves as image creators and world makers.

Hopefully at this point we may begin to notice some natural links between the landscape of the Desert Fathers and the rapidly shifting landscape in which we currently find ourselves: both share an emphasis on the present moment and both are inhabited by people who long for connection. As we saw in our consideration of the practices of silence and contemplation in the Desert Fathers, “the desert means a stepping back from

---

<sup>141</sup> Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom*, 143.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid.

<sup>144</sup> Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom*, 142-143.

the great system of collusive fantasy in which I try to decide who I am, sometimes try to persuade you to tell me who I am (in accord, of course, with my preferences)."<sup>145</sup> This does not sound much different than someone trying to create a Facebook profile, in which one is creating an identity based upon how one wishes to be perceived.

What is fundamentally different about these landscapes, however, is the place at which this present moment happens and the means by which one orients oneself and connects to said present moment. Given that God transcends time, yet human beings live within time, the space and place in which humans and God occupy time together is the present moment. The sacredness of this moment is not unique to Christians. However, what is unique to Christians is that God dwelt on earth as an embodied uniquely divine and human being, Jesus. If Marshall McLuhan's observation holds true, that the medium is the message, God's choosing to offer a new covenant through the life, death, and resurrection of a human body sends a clear message: bodies matter.

One of the gifts that we find in Christian worship is the offering of physical, material matter in the sacraments of the Eucharist and Baptism. Something is done to us through the Spirit's work through our consumption of the bread and the cup, and our encounter with water. And it does not simply act upon us as individuals, but as members of Christ's body. Quite literally, our bodies change as we ingest the food and

---

<sup>145</sup> Williams, 48.



drink, connecting us to one another and Christ through the elements; and the baptismal waters serve as future promise of the new body we will be given when Christ returns. These practices serve to reorient our bodies in ways that remind us that God is at the center, and we are not; they serve to remind us of past and future promises and they do so in an embodied present. As Smith says, the “Spirit meets us where we are as liturgical animals, as embodied agents, inviting us in into that “suite” of disciplines that are conduits of transformative, empowering grace.”<sup>146</sup>

While the landscapes between the desert and the Twitter-sphere may have changed, we would be foolish to dismiss practices that have served the Saints for centuries. As former Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, notes,

if the desert literature is right, then we all need training in listening and attending almost more than anything else. Unless we are capable of patience before each other, before the mysteriousness of each other, it’s very unlikely that we will do God’s will with any kind of fullness. Without a basic education in attention, no deeply ethical behavior is really going to be possible.<sup>147</sup>

As noted, the challenge in our attempt to be attentive to the moment is not simply the Internet’s design to scatter our attention. The ultimate challenge to attentiveness to the God in a networked culture is that its end is not oriented around God. In fact, it is quite the opposite. So, what is the *telos* of the Web? I propose that its

---

<sup>146</sup> Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom*, 154.

<sup>147</sup> Williams, 84.

end is us, or “the self.” Though the Web gives the illusion that it is a window into the world it is perhaps more like looking out a window with a mirror just beyond its pane. The Internet points us back to ourselves. Though some may have scoffed, Oxford was quite astute when it claimed 2013’s “Word of the Year” to be “selfie.”<sup>148</sup> Astute, not simply because selfie’s have become ubiquitous, but because “selfies” capture what the web is all about: us. We are the center of its universe. Aside from “selfies,” also think of how we talk of our “personal networks.” Many of us are members of multiple networks and while there are differences between these networks, one thing rings true across them all: each individual is at the center of his or her personal network, which is in essence, “a solar system of one to two thousand and more people orbiting around us.”<sup>149</sup> And, not surprisingly, we like being in the center. The center brings with it a sense of control and a sense of power.

We see in the literature of the desert that attention first brings attention to one’s inner self before we can be attentive to the world around us. At first brush, this may seem like it is more of the same—narcissism—but it’s different in that the *telos* is different. The end is for the good of others, for the shalom of all of God’s creation, not for our own gain. Moreover, to be attentive to one’s true self, one must continually to the

---

<sup>148</sup> In case you have not taken a “selfie” nor understand what it is, here is the definition: selfie *noun, informal* (also selfy; plural selfies): a photograph that one has taken of oneself, typically one taken with a smartphone or webcam and uploaded to a social media website.

<http://blog.oxforddictionaries.com/press-releases/oxford-dictionaries-word-of-the-year-2013/>

<sup>149</sup> Rainie and Wellman, 50.

work to dismantle the profiles we have created to represent our selves.<sup>150</sup> We believe that in being created *Imago Dei*, by the very nature of our humanity we are “naturally attuned to the reality of God” and thus our task in growing up in the life of the spirit is to try to “recover that attunement.”<sup>151</sup> We are all a “unique kind of echo of God” and in order to hear this echo we need to silence ourselves long enough to hear, and still ourselves to see.<sup>152</sup> Reorienting ourselves as image bearers will require moments in which we cease to be mere image creators.

In the shaping of this attention the “digital divide” will not remain as deep, as common ground can be found behind our longing and desires. For instance, teens have great interest in knowing what’s going on in the lives of their peers, coupled with a terrific anxiety of missing out or being out of the loop. This is not new and something the adults can probably remember sensing themselves. What is different, however, is now if teens stop sending messages and engaging in their social networks, “they risk becoming invisible.”<sup>153</sup> Seeing the fear behind the behavior shifts the conversation to one of judgment to one of empathy and can produce empathetic conversations and asking more critical questions without criticizing.

---

<sup>150</sup> Williams, 49.

<sup>151</sup> Ibid.

<sup>152</sup> Ibid.

<sup>153</sup> Carr, 116.

Many of the monastic and religious reforms of the medieval West were inspired by the “desert ideal,” this longing for a space and place of salvation, connection to God, and connection to one’s self. In the same way this is where Sherry Turkle, author of *Alone Together* seems to be drawn, to wistfully long for a time before smartphones. Turkle is of the generation that can remember a time “when there was not,” in regards to constant connectivity. It makes sense that she would long for a past time, as this is how nostalgia works.

Nostalgia is not bad in and of itself as it often points not simply to a specific time or event, but an ethos or deeper longing. Those who long for the “desert ideal” (most likely) long not to live in a single cell in the middle of the wilderness with little more than a mat and a tunic, but rather long for a space where the clutter and chatter of their lives and minds are quieted long enough to encounter the living God. Those who long for a time pre-cell phones most likely long for a time when the present moment was something in which we rested, and not something that kept us restless.

What will be interesting to assess in the future is if those for whom a time of pervasive disconnectedness is a mere folklore or anecdote of their aged parents (akin to the stories of having to walk a mile to and from school, uphill, and in the snow) are drawn to spaces of disconnection. It won’t be long before we see if Augustine’s thoughts on memory and time ring true: will there be something that still pulls those who know nothing aside from being highly networked to times of silence and stillness, will they be

drawn to disarm the frenzy around the immediate? If not, the task before those who do indeed remember a time “pre-Facebook” is to shape the imagination of these digital natives to remember this time of their (living) ancestors.

This is not a task that ought to be done alone, however, but in collaboration. Teens are, in the words of boyd, “navigating one heck of a cultural labyrinth.”<sup>154</sup> Rather than resist, bemoan, and wax poetically about times gone by, adults need to realize that we, too, are situated in this same labyrinth and we are going to need use our collective understandings of this cultural moment to make our way forward, using both the gifts of the old and the new to do so.

Thankfully, there are a growing number of people trying to do just that, and some of them are even coming from within the Church (thanks be to God). There are churches that are actively engaging social network sites such as Instagram in their youth catechism classes, and encouraging youth and adult alike to engage in Twitter conversations about the sermon or as a means by which to invite people into the congregation. Churches are using Social Network Sites as a means to share prayer requests and communal concerns, and these sites are much easily accessed and updated than traditional websites. In *Tweet if you (Heart) Jesus: Practicing Church in the Digital Reformation*, Elizabeth Drescher cites the examples of an Anglican priest in Nova Scotia who adapted a medieval practice of blessing farming equipment to offer “grace for

---

<sup>154</sup> boyd, 53.

gadgets,” and a church in Texas who hands out MP3 players to children attending worship services with their parents so they can “hear the gospel in their own child language” while simultaneously “absorb[ing] the ritual and the hymns of the fellowship.”<sup>155</sup> Congregations are finding ways to mix the old and the new as they forgo traditional church directories for Social Networking sites, encourage Twitter use as a means of connection, and at the same time hold staunchly to ten minutes of communal silence in their weekly worship service.<sup>156</sup>

This last example reminds us that it is not simply that we need to become more media literate as we navigate this cultural labyrinth, but we also need to slow down. We need to take time to listen for the echo of God within us, and take enough time to think through the impetus behind our media choices. Slowing down is undoubtedly a challenge given the pace of which things change, and may seem like a lofty (and perhaps antiquated) ideal as the “faster the territory changes, the less viable are the slow options.”<sup>157</sup> Yet, the less slow time that remains to think decisions through, discuss and acquire a distanced overview, the greater is the risk for disastrous errors.<sup>158</sup> As slow time

---

<sup>155</sup> Drescher, Elizabeth, *Tweet If You (Heart) Jesus: Practicing Church in the Digital Reformation* (New York: Morehouse Publishing, 2011), 5.

<sup>156</sup> Byassee, Jason, “Ancient liturgy for scruffy hipsters with smartphones: A profile of Nadia Bolz-Weber and House for All Sinners and Saints,” (N.p. October 18, 2011) <http://www.cpx.cts.edu/newmedia/findings/case-studies/house-for-all-sinners-and-saints/article> Accessed March 20, 2014.

<sup>157</sup> Eriksen, Thomas Hylland, *Tyranny of the Moment: Fast and Slow time in the Information Age* (Pluto Press: London, 2001), 65.

<sup>158</sup> *Ibid.*

continues to decrease, we become more dependent on our instincts to help us navigate the territory. Depending on how we choose to cultivate instincts could determine whether or not this is good news or not.

In her attempt to assess what impacts new media technology might have on linguistics, Naomi Baron concluded in the early 2000s there were three major changes taking place in our society: a growing ability to assert control over when we interact with whom, the amount of writing we are now doing (and what effect quantity may be having upon quality), and finally, the end of anticipation.<sup>159</sup> This is what Baron says about this third change:

I have begun to sense a third effect of language technologies that is much harder to articulate but which stands to reshape how we interact socially with one another. To the extent language technologies make it possible to always be in contact, we end up sharing a great deal of information and experiences, which in earlier times we might have saved up for face-to-face meetings. Children at summer camp IM their friends back home, and camp administrators post photos of the day's adventures on web sites for parents to access. College students use mobile phones to call home, sometimes daily, offering play-by-play accounts of their activities and angst...I have taken to calling this phenomenon "the end of anticipation," because we no longer await the return of family and friends to share in their stories. For as long as humanity can remember, anticipation of reunion has been part of our social definition...if we are always together virtually, we may need to redefine the substance of meeting again face-to-face.<sup>160</sup>

As Christians, we are called to live in a state of anticipation as we live within the "already but not yet" time of God's Kingdom. If our cultural moment is wired to end

---

<sup>159</sup> Baron, 5-7.

<sup>160</sup> Ibid.

this sense of anticipation in its hunger for the immediate, it could pose some deep challenges to our ability patiently wait for the Coming Kingdom of God, or to even spot it as it arrives. It was impossible for the monastics to think of “spiritual life” in abstraction from the actual business of living in the body of Christ, living in concrete community.”<sup>161</sup> While virtual spaces and communities may seem less “concrete” to some, they are communities nonetheless. Communities are being embodied in different manners, but this does not change the fact that we come to these communities as embodied beings.

As boyd found if one thing is clear about our current landscape: the Internet has not evolved into an idyllic zone in which people are free from the limitations of the embodied world.<sup>162</sup> We have bodies that have limitations. As we saw in our consideration of Augustine’s understanding of time, our minds naturally resist living in the present moment because it reminds us of our or mortality. What if, however, we learned to see our mortality as a gift and not something to be feared? What if we stopped trying to escape our bodies, but to live more mindfully in them? How might this shape not only our worship, but how we choose to engage with communication technologies? What would it look like for us to stop being enslaved to the “now” that

---

<sup>161</sup> Williams, 11.

<sup>162</sup> boyd, 53.



intrudes from our Tweets, inboxes, and texts and instead be attentive to the present moment, resting in the Presence of the present?

## **4. How should we get there? Two Sermons on Attentiveness and Reorientation**

In conclusion, I offer two sermons to illustrate what it might look like to engage congregations in conversations around technology. You will note the sermons are not prescriptive, but designed to stir imagination and wonder. I have chosen sermons as an end to this thesis given the significance of *ends* and *means*. It is in worship that we find liturgies that reorient ourselves in the world as we collectively place God in the center of our worship. Listening to God's Word together not only reorients us, but helps us collectively imagine the Kingdom of God.

### **4.1 The Will to Wonder: Exodus 3:1-15**

"Then Moses said, "I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up." When the Lord saw that he had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, "Moses, Moses!" And he said, "Here I am." Then he said, "Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground." (Exodus 3:1-5)

Many of my friends are the parents of young children and their lives have been reordered in both wondrous and challenging ways. The other day I asked a friend what one of the surprising things has been for her in the past 15 months of learning to be a mom. She commented on what a joy it has been to watch her son, Jake, discover the world. "It's as if I get to discover the world all over again through his eyes," she said,

“and I catch myself thinking things like, ‘yeah, it *is* pretty wild that when you drop certain round objects they bounce back up at you.” Jake’s ability to wonder has instilled a renewed sense of wonder and gratitude in her, as it does with many parents.

As well as joy, however, the natural wonderment of young children also brings a new level of testing to one’s patience. For example, what usually is a 30 second walk to the end of the drive to fetch the mail stretches to an eternity as the child wants to stop and examine every.single.pinecone, as if it is the most amazing thing they have ever seen. In those moments the child’s ability to pay attention to the details of life are not as endearing because there are other things that need to get done!

Ancient philosophers Plato and Aristotle saw wonder as the precursor to knowledge—something that “ceases once the cause of a phenomenon is explained.”<sup>1</sup> Jewish philosopher, Abraham Heschel, in his book *God in Search of Man*, however, raises the question if wonder’s worth is simply that it leads to the acquisition of knowledge. For, he says, to the prophets wonder is a “form of thinking. It is not the beginning of

---

<sup>1</sup> Abraham Heschel, *God in Search of Man: A Philosophy of Judaism* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1955), 46.

knowledge but an act that goes beyond knowledge. It does not come to an end when knowledge is acquired; it is an attitude that never ceases.”<sup>2</sup>

We have seen in the advancement of civilization, however, and in our own lives, that as we “progress” the sense of wonder declines. We live in a society that prides itself on having the answers (or being able to access them with a quick Google search), of being able to claim beyond the shadow of a doubt how and why certain things are true (and find the Wikipedia entry to back our claims). We live lives that pay attention to the clock, the speedometer, the television, the cell phone, the list of things to do and we no longer stop and look at every.single.pinecone because we do not even notice they are there in the first place.

And this leads us back to our man Moses, wandering about “beyond the wilderness” with the sheep of his father-in-law. We know now that Moses would turn out to be God’s great partner in the liberation of the people Israel from bondage in Egypt. When we meet him in early in Exodus, however, he was not that man quite yet. He was still an elderly man hiding in the Arabian Desert from the murder he committed back in the day.

---

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

We find in our text this morning something quite unique. Truth be told, there are a few unique findings...a bush that burns and is not consumed. A man who has spent much of his life hiding: first hidden by his mother in a river to escape genocide, which he then manages to do, ironically enough, by being adopted in the home of the one who has ordered the genocide. He grows up in privilege, perhaps hiding from his kinsfolk who are suffering greatly, until one day the ties that bind him to his people surge as he murders an Egyptian who is beating a Hebrew. Word of his murder gets out and he flees from the very household in which he hid, perhaps content to finish his days hiding in the wilderness as a shepherd. And while yes, a bush that burns and is not consumed is unique, and while yes, an 80 year old fugitive being chosen to lead God's people is unique.

The uniquely unique thing we find, however, is the revelation of God's name — for we find in the 3<sup>rd</sup> chapter of Exodus the only place in Hebrew scriptures where we find this name. In Hebrew it is the Sacred Tetragrammaton — *Yod He Vav He* — as we now speak and spell it is it Yahweh. So unique, mysterious and divine this name was, that it was considered literally unspeakable for the Jews and instead, they used Elohim or Adonai in speaking or writing. Interestingly, many scholars are now convinced that God's name was not spoken at all, but breathed. That the correct pronunciation is an

attempt to replicate and imitate the very sound of inhalation and exhalation.<sup>3</sup> Let's try it. First say it with me, Yahweh. Now take a deep breath. Not bad, let's try the breath thing again. Inhale—Yah...exhale...Weh. What a wonder that the first and last thing we do on this earth is speak the name of God.

"I am who I am" is one translation of this name. Or, "I will be whatever I will be." God's name is a mystery and a declaration all wrapped up into one. God's name is not a noun, but rather a future oriented verb phrase, signifying not simply that God exists but that God is active. In essence, God's name could be translated as, "I will be known by what I do." In other words, hold tight, pay attention and don't try to pin me down or put me in a box.

Names are significant for many reasons. One of the most fundamental reasons being that how we name things often determines how we care for them, or how we treat them. A few years ago I found myself living (for the first time in my life) in a home with a yard that required my effort to maintain it. I was eager, ready for the challenge. I had always admired gardeners. People who were proud to perpetually have dirt under their fingernails, people who nurtured life in places where I simply saw a mess of varying

---

<sup>3</sup> Rohr, 25.

shades of green and shapes of leaves. Plant whisperers who didn't spend much time wondering, "is it a weed, or isn't it?" They just knew.

As I looked about my yard I thought I discovered the perfect place to start as there were splotches of grass that were markedly taller than most of the grass in the yard, and I knew why: during the winter we had our driveway plowed one time and while I was thankful for the break from shoveling, I was not impressed with lack of concern the one plowing seemed to have with the landscaping. As a result, a hose had been broken and now I was seeing evidence of what I knew to be true: our ornamental grass had been scattered throughout our yard. So I got to work, carefully digging up the grass and found that it had bulbs, further indicating (in my mind) that it was not a weed. I transplanted the scattered grass into the flowerbed; proud of the care I was putting into my yard.

As I was finishing up my friend Kathy wandered over. She looked at my work and simply asked, "Why are you transplanting the wild onions?" I pointed out that no, they must be plants as they have bulbs. She laughed and then pointed out that the bulbs smelled suspiciously like onions. Thus began my gardening career.

I have since learned that many of these zen-like gardeners share one simple secret: a weed is anything you don't want in your garden. Which means I can treat

anything that I don't want like a weed simply by calling it a weed, yanking it out and be done with it.

How we name things determines how we care for them.

So back to our text for the day. God comes down to reveal Godself to an 80-year-old fugitive in the wilderness. This revelation is not simply for Moses' sake, but for the sake of the Israelites. In this revelation we see that God has heard the cries of God's people, God responds, and that God's promises are still real. The revelation of the great "I am" is not simply for Moses' sake, or the Israelites sake but it is for our sake—for we are the people of God. A people who God has not been forgotten...even though sometimes it feels that way as we await to receive the call with the diagnosis, or we find ourselves reminded of our deep loss every time we sit at the dinner table that now has one more empty place setting. We have not been forgotten when we wonder if our kids will ever get their acts together, or when we wonder if our parents will stop behaving like children. We have not been forgotten even when it feels like everyone in the world has found love except us, or when we wonder if we will ever find a place where we feel that we truly belong.

We are a people who are not named "the forgotten ones," but named as God's beloved ones. A people who are given life and being by the One who enlivens all of



creation. And this One, this Great I am, is the risen and resurrected One. And today in the Christian church, we celebrate Christ as the Ascended One. The One who has gone before us to make a way for us, to prepare a place for us. The One who claims, "I am the bread of life," "I am the light of the world," "I am the gate," I am the resurrection and the life, "I am the good shepherd," "I am the way, the truth and the life." Jesus says these things to help understand the mystery that is God. Unfortunately, many of us have twisted these claims into equations, or finite descriptions because we are a people who are more comfortable with answers than we are with questions. We think that because we've seen a gate, or a light or know a shepherd or two that we can pin down who Jesus is. As Eugene Peterson says, too often we obsess over Jesus as truth, that we neglect Jesus as the Way. A way that is not an equation to be solved, but a person to be followed.

I am who I am. I will be what I will be.

And for those of us who long to know this great "I am" it is as simple and demanding as learning to pay attention. Moses could have easily seen the burning bush, thought to himself, "Huh, that's odd" and been on his way. Moses could have easily had his head to the ground watching his own footsteps, ruminating about the circumstances

of his life, or been so obsessed with the work he had to do that he missed the bush all together.

But Moses looked.

And Moses turned aside.

Moses put his agenda on hold.

And it was when God saw that Moses had turned aside that he called to him from the bush. As the people of God we are called to be a people who pay attention. For more often than not, God does not show up in burning bushes but in the everyday, seemingly mundane, nitty-gritty details of our lives. Do we name these moments as boring or pointless? Or do we name them as opportunities to encounter the living Christ.

Learning to pay attention begins simply by learning to breathe. Breathing connects us to ourselves, to our bodies; it connects us to one another—for breathing one thing that all God's people have in common—and it connects us to the One that enables all things to live and move and have their being. What we lack, says Rabbi Heschel, is not a will to believe but a will to wonder.<sup>4</sup> And it is not merely about our happiness or

---

<sup>4</sup> Heschel, 46.

contentment, but an ability to see God. For the “awareness of the divine begins with wonder.”

So to end today, we are going to breathe together. Much like we did a few moments ago. This time I invite you to close your eyes. Focus on your breath. As you inhale and exhale gently whisper the name of the Great I Am.

Yah....weh....Yah....weh...

## **4.2 Keeping Your Back to the Future<sup>5</sup>: Isaiah 30:18-21, John 14:5-7**

And when you turn to the right or you turn to the left, your ears shall hear a word behind you saying, "This is the way, walk in it." (Isaiah 30:21)

Thomas said to him, "Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way? Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him." (John 14:5-7)

Having to utilize your critical thinking skills while driving is perhaps a thing of the past. More and more cars are equipped with systems that will tell you precisely where to turn, suggest where you may want to stop to eat, how much you'll pay for gas to get there and how many minutes until you arrive. If your car somehow is not equipped with a GPS, odds are you (or one of your passengers) is equipped with a smartphone. And if still you somehow still manage to mess it up, a sultry voice with the accent of your own choosing will gently let you know that it is "recalculating...recalculating...recalculating" until you are once again on track to your destination.

I am aware that by God's grace some people are born with an "internal compass gene" and might pride themselves in not needing a GPS. I realize that for others, the GPS is a lifesaver and can indeed be of assistance in dire situations. And, it's not that I

---

<sup>5</sup> Portions of this sermon were preached at a Baccalaureate service in 2011.

am anti-technological-advances, it is that I believe that in some respects Global Positioning Systems are making us stupider. Or, put more gently, less wise. This was demonstrated a couple years ago in an episode of the Office when Michael Scott, despite even Dwight's resistance, is convinced the sultry voice in their car desires for him to drive right into Lake Scranton.

Ahh, but you say, I would *never* follow Siri—no matter how sultry she may sound—*that* blindly. I concur, Michael Scott does not seem to possess the most developed set of critical thinking skills. But while I don't doubt your obvious brilliance, at the same time I concur, I also caution: never say never. For if we pause to think about it even now, we would realize there are many voices that we follow quite blindly.

I cannot help but wonder what exactly it is that we are drawn to about navigational systems. Is it indeed the security we find in the directions, or is it the pride of being able to be self-sufficient and independent? Is it the comfort of knowing our errors can quickly be recalculated, or the convenience of being told exactly where to turn? Somehow, GPS enables us to both nurture our quest to be independent, while making us completely dependent on technology. As Eugene Peterson wisely said, the "technologized world knows how to make things, how to get places, but is not

conspicuous for living well.”<sup>6</sup> Or, to put it more simply, our GPS might keep us from getting lost – but it won’t keep us from getting lost, if you know what I mean.

We come from a line of people who have desired to live well. The ancient Hebrews, the people of God, were a people who, much like us, found themselves in cultural currents of progress. They were a people who were so committed to the pursuit of God that they continued to live life in a way that set them apart from the culture that beckoned them to join in the cultivation of new and great civilizations. Despite the allure of some of the greatest world civilizations, they were a people who kept to their own ways and maintained a counterculture that marked them as God’s people.

Yet, despite their commitment, the ancient Hebrews, to whom the prophet Isaiah was speaking, were a people who struggled, much like us, with idolatry—placing their trust in ways and means that were not the ways and means of God. In our Old Testament passage today, we find the prophet calling the people of Israel to find their strength not in their own ways but in their trust in God. They are promised that whether they turn to the right, or to the left, they will hear a voice from behind them saying, “this is the way, walk in it.”

---

<sup>6</sup> Peterson, Eugene, *The Jesus Way* (Eerdmans Publishing Co.: Grand Rapids, MI, 2007), 28.

To understand the deeper significance of this, it is important to note that the ancient Hebrews had a much different understanding of time than we Westerners.<sup>7</sup> Unlike our understanding of time as linear—past, present and future—time for the Israelites was not a line but rather a destination, a focal point. This destination, this focal point, was God. The people of Israel were not working to move ahead, farther down the line, but to orient themselves to God—God who is source of all life. Since, at this point, God had revealed Godself most profoundly to their ancestors: Adam, Abraham, Moses, Jacob, and others, the Hebrews sought to *return* to the Source—the ancient times. While we face the future, they literally faced the past. In some of our translations of the Hebrew text we find references to “the coming days” —referring to the future—a literal translation of the Hebrew, however, would be “in the behind days.”<sup>8</sup> Because the Hebrews faced the past, the days yet to come were *behind* them. The Hebrews, in a very literal sense, backed into the future.

---

<sup>7</sup> In his *Anthropology of the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1974). Hans Walter Wolff gives the helpful metaphor of one rowing in a boat towards his destination—while the rower is moving towards his destination, he does so with his back to the future and with guidance from what he has already past to orient him toward his destination. We know where we are headed by understanding from where we have come, 87-88.

<sup>8</sup> Wolff, 87-88.

When you keep your back to the future a few things happen. One, you are constantly aware of God's faithfulness. Looking back gives us the perspective that God has carried us through before and this bolsters our ability to trust that God will indeed carry us through again. This bolstering is essential, because the other thing that keeping our back to the future does is requires us to trust.

Here's something I've realized about myself: I'm a careful stepper. Even when I'm walking forward. I have found on various hiking excursions—or even in simple walks around the block—I tend to be pretty cautious—particularly when the path in front of me is rocky, steeply declining or it is dark out. Some might say that I am simply a slow mover, but I prefer cautious stepper. You see, deep down inside I know that I actually am physically capable of moving faster...it's just that I am chicken. My mind is undoubtedly faster than my body, and so as I am gingerly moving down the path my mind has already envisioned a plethora of unnatural angles my joints will make with one simple misstep.

Some of you might relate to this, and others of you are able to bound ahead of me without a care in the world. I am willing to bet, however, that if we were all traveling down the path backwards, the playing field would be leveled. We would all be equally



disoriented. I would imagine our steps would all become a bit more ginger and cautious. And, I would imagine, we would all equally welcome a voice to lead us on the way.

The text tells us, “Your eyes shall see your Teacher, when you turn to the left or you turn to the right, your ears will a word behind you saying, this is the way, walk in it.”

Could it be, that this voice is the voice of the very One who claims to be the way, the truth and the life?

Often we skip over *the way* of Jesus to get to *the truth* of Jesus, but as author Eugene Peterson points out, “the way of Jesus is the way that we practice and come to understand the truth of Jesus.”<sup>9</sup>The way of Jesus is one that is participatory, one that we discover as we live Jesus in our homes and in our workplaces, with our friends and family.<sup>10</sup> The way of Jesus is one that is an alternative to the dominant ways of our world. The way of Jesus is a way of dependence, humility and obedience to God alone.

And this way—the Way of Jesus—calls to us at the very core of our being. There is something about Jesus, about the Way of Jesus, that resonates with us and prompts us to wonder, to hope, to believe that this Way is indeed the truth and the life. That the true

---

<sup>9</sup> Peterson, 4.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

life is a life of peace and justice, that the real world is a world of beauty and spirituality. We long for this world and when we are given glimpses of this Way we long for it even more.

Keeping our back to the future and our eyes on Christ helps us to drown out the persistent voices that lure us to believe the truth of another way—that we are to do whatever it takes to get ahead, be the best, the smartest, the wealthiest, the most beautiful. And to seek after these things no matter the cost to our sanity and our health, no matter the cost to those around us, no matter the cost to God’s good creation. Voices that do not calm but rather stir fear in us that we will never be good enough, that we will get left behind, that we will fail and never be loved for who we really are. Voices that leave us paralyzed in our decision making for fear of making the wrong choice. Do I take this job or that internship? Is this the person I am supposed to marry or not? Is it better to go to graduate school next fall or defer for a year? Should I major in this, that, or both?

The Word says, however, that when you turn to the left or when you turn to the right you will hear a voice behind you saying, “This is the way, walk in it.” It is less about questioning whether it’s this job, that program, this person, or that city, and more

about trusting that you do know the way—and that Way is not simply a path, but a person.

I know from conversations with many of you that some have a clear view of where you are headed next—your bags are packed, your plans have been made and you have a only a few things to cross off your list before you settle into what is next. And others of you are not so sure. Your bags are also packed but your plans are still shifting, making it impossible to even write a list of things that need to get done. The challenge for all of us—*all* of us—regardless of plans we may or may not have, is to continue to keep our back to the future. Keep our eyes on Christ. For when our eyes are on Christ, though we may not always know where we are going, we can know *who we are*. Whose we are. We listen to the voice that has shown us that another way is indeed possible. That while the future is not *ours* to make, nor is it ours to fear for the One who is the Way has gone ahead to prepare the way.

I am going to ask you to humor me one last time. I want you all to stand if you are able, now turn around and close your eyes. Listen again to the trustworthy and true Word of God:

Whether you turn to the left or to the right, you will hear a voice behind you saying this is the way, walk in it.

How can we know the way? They asked...Jesus replied, "I am the way, the truth and the life."

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

## Bibliography

- Anderson, Janna and Lee Rainie. *The Gurus Speak*. Washington, D.C.: Pew Research Center, March 11, 2014. Accessed March 15, 2013.  
<http://www.pewinternet.org/2014/03/11/the-gurus-speak/>.
- Augustine, Saint, Bishop of Hippo and Henry Chadwick (trans.). *Confessions*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1991.
- Augustine, Saint, Bishop of Hippo and Bonafice Ramsey. *Homilies on the First Epistle of John*. New York: New City Press, 2008.
- Barnhart, Bruno. *Second Simplicity*. Manwah, NJ: Paulist, 1999.
- Baron, Naomi. *Always On: Language in an Online and Mobile World*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2008.
- Bonaventure. *Classics of Western Spirituality: Bonaventure*. New York: Paulist Press, 1978.
- Bondi, Roberta C. *To Love as God Loves*. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987.
- boyd, danah. *It's Complicated: The Social Lives of Networked Teens*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014.
- Brann, Eva T. H. *What, Then, Is Time?* Boston: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001.
- Byassee, Jason. "Ancient liturgy for scruffy hipsters with smartphones: A profile of Nadia Bolz-Weber and House for All Sinners and Saints." (N.p. October 18, 2011). Accessed March 20, 2014.  
<http://www.cpx.cts.edu/newmedia/findings/case-studies/house-for-all-sinners-and-saints/article>
- Carr, Nicholas G. *The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains*. New York: W.W. Norton, 2010.
- Cavadini, John C. "The Darkest Enigma: Reconsidering the Self in Augustine's Thought." *Augustinian Studies* 38.1 (2007): 119-132.

- Chadwick, Henry. "The Ascetic Ideal in the Early Church." *Monks, Hermits and the Ascetic Tradition*. W. J. Sheils, ed. Oxford: Blackwell, 1985.
- Coleman, Beth. *Hello Avatar: Rise of the Networked Generation*. Cambridge, MA: MIT, 2011.
- Crites, Stephen. "The Narrative Quality of Experience." *Why Narrative: Readings in Narrative Theology*. Hauweras, Stanley and L. Gregory Jones, ed. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1997.
- Drescher, Elizabeth. *Tweet If You (Heart) Jesus: Practicing Church in the Digital Reformation*. New York: Morehouse Publishing, 2011.
- Eggers, Dave. *The Circle*. Toronto: Alfred A. Knopf, 2013.
- Eriksen, Thomas Hylland, *Tyranny of the Moment: Fast and Slow time in the Information Age*. Pluto Press: London, 2001.
- Foehr, Ulla G., *Media Multitasking Among American Youth: Prevalence, Predictors, and Pairings*. The Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation, December 2006. Accessed March 8, 2014.  
<http://kaiserfamilyfoundation.files.wordpress.com/2013/01/7592.pdf>
- Futch, Michael. *Augustine on the Successiveness of Time*. Augustinian Studies Vol. 33, Issue 1. Atlanta: Emory University, 2002.
- Hankey, Wayne J. "Self-knowledge and God as Other in Augustine: Problems for a Postmodern Retrieval." *Dalhousie University*. N.p., 1999.
- Hausheer, Herman. "St. Augustine's Conception of Time." *The Philosophical Review*, Vol. 46, No. 5 (Sep., 1937), pp. 503-512.
- Heschel, Abraham. *God in Search of Man: A Philosophy of Judaism*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1955.
- Johnson, Steven. *Everything Bad Is Good for You: How Today's Popular Culture Is Actually Making Us Smarter*. New York: Riverhead, 2005.
- Johnston, Angus M. *Time as a Psalm in St. Augustine*. N.p., 1996.

- Kirby, W.J. Torrance. *Praise as the Soul's Overcoming of Time in the Confessions of St. Augustine*. Vol. VI, No. 3. Princeton: Princeton, 1997.
- Lienhard, Joseph T., Earl C. Muller, and Roland J. Teske. *Augustine: Presbyter Factus Sum*. New York: P. Lang, 1993.
- Matthews, Gareth B. *The Augustinian Tradition*. Berkeley: University of California, 1999.
- Merton, Thomas. *The Wisdom of the Desert: Sayings from the Desert Fathers of the Fourth Century*. New York: New Directions Books, 1960.
- Nightingale, Andrea Wilson. *Once out of Nature: Augustine on Time and the Body*. Chicago: Univ. of Chicago, 2011.
- O'Connor, William Patrick. *The Concept of the Human Soul According to Saint Augustine*. Catholic University of America, 1921.
- Oden, Thomas. *The Living God: Systematic Theology, Vol. 1*. New York: HarperCollins, 1987.
- Paul, Annie Murphy *You'll Never Learn: Students Can't Resist Multi-Tasking*. Slate Online Magazine, 13 May 2013. Accessed March 10, 2014.  
[http://www.slate.com/articles/health\\_and\\_science/science/2013/05/multitasking\\_while\\_studying\\_divided\\_attention\\_and\\_technological\\_gadgets.html](http://www.slate.com/articles/health_and_science/science/2013/05/multitasking_while_studying_divided_attention_and_technological_gadgets.html)
- Pelikan, Jaroslav. *The Mystery of Continuity: Time and History, Memory and Eternity in the Thought of Saint Augustine*. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1986.
- Peterson, Eugene. *The Jesus Way*. Eerdmans Publishing Co.: Grand Rapids, MI, 2007.
- Rainie, Lee, and Wellman, Berry. *Networked: The New Social Operating System*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2012.
- Rohr, Richard. *The Naked Now: Learning to See as the Mystics See*. New York: Crossroads Publishing, 2009.

- Ross, Donald L. "Time, the Heaven of Heavens, and Memory in Augustine's Confessions." *Augustinian Studies* 22 (2010): 191-205.
- Reklis, Kathryn. "X-Reality and the Incarnation." *New Media Project at Union Theological Seminary*. New Media Project, 10 May 2012. Web. 05 Mar. 2013.
- Rushkoff, Douglas. *Present Shock: When Everything Happens Now*. New York: Penguin, 2013.
- Smith, James K.A., *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009.
- . *Imagining the Kingdom: How Worship Works (Cultural Liturgies)*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academics, 2013.
- Stock, Brian. *Augustine the Reader: Meditation, Self-Knowledge and the Ethics of Interpretation*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press: 1996.
- Stone, Linda. "Just Breathe: Building the Case for Email Apnea." *The Huffington Post*. TheHuffingtonPost.com, 08 Feb. 2008. Web. 05 Mar. 2013.
- Thomson, Christopher J. "The Theological Dimension of time in *Confessions* XI." *Augustine: Presbyter Factus Sum*. Lienhard, Joseph T., Earl C. Muller, and Roland J. Teske (eds). New York: P. Lang, 1993.
- Turkle, Sherry. "Always-On/Always-On-You: The Tethered Self." *Handbook of Mobile Communication Studies*, James. F. Katz, ed. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008.
- . *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other*. New York: Basic, 2011.
- . *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1995.
- . *The Second Self*. Cambridge (MA): MIT, 2005.
- Wager, Rachel, *Godwired: Religion, Ritual and Virtual Reality*. Routledge Taylor & Francis Group: London, 2012.



Ward, Benedicta. *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers: The Alphabetical Collection*. London: Mowbrays, 1975.

---. *The Desert Fathers: Sayings of the Early Christian Monks*. London: Penguin Books, 2003.

Watts, Duncan. "The HBR List: Breakthrough Ideas for 2007" *The Harvard Business Review* (July 2007). Accessed March 13, 2014. <http://hbr.org/2007/02/the-hbr-list-breakthrough-ideas-for-2007/ar/1>

Weil, Simone. "Reflections on the Right Use of School Studies with a View to the Love of God." *Waiting for God*. New York: Harper & Row, 1973.

Wetzel, James. *Time After Augustine*. Vol. 31, No. 3 Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1995. Religious Studies. JSTOR.

Williams, Rowan. *Where God Happens: Discovering Christ in One Another*. Boston: New Seeds, 2005.

Wolff, Hans Walter. *Anthropology of the Old Testament*. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1974.

