

Exodus from Eden:

Comprehending our Creation in an Un/Real World

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David Lochhead Memorial Symposium
Virtual Un/Reality: The Spirituality of Cyberspace
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Over the past two days, we have discussed at some length the variety and nature of the impact of our technologies on community, theology, and on our very being. We have looked carefully at the boundaries between reality and cyber-reality; contemplating the nature of the slash in the phrase Virtual Un/Reality, yet another boundary-pressing gift of thought offered to us by the late David Lochhead, certainly Ecunet's, and arguably Cyberspace's, premier theologian. Many of those gathered in this room have been a part of a revolution that, for us, was founded in the context of community, and our desires to expand that community with the God-given gift of our intellect, applied to technologies of the very basic element of relationship itself: Communication.

Yet, we are now gathered here twenty years beyond the enthusiastic explosion of possibility that we experienced at the dawn of asynchronous communication readily available to the masses. Today, it is hard not to be at least concerned, or at best cautious, about the nature of how, once again, our creations have shaped us individually, and also our society, in ways we may not have anticipated.

Surely, many of our hopes were indeed realized. Easy access to information is the norm; making web-search engines a profitable, billion-dollar enterprise. Creative forums allow for real ministry to take place; who could not have been affected by Donel McClellan's blog in the last days of his life, an enduring tribute that I still offer to others undergoing their final transformation in life. Cell phones and Skype internet phones, web conferences and twenty years of Sermonshop, easy access to medical information and a long standing

prayer chapel, all speak to the multi-disciplinary understanding of the possible in a connected world of cyberspace.

But at the same time, in our environment of instant communication, text messaging, Ipod insulation, a cyber-predator plagued, privacy-threatened, identity-endangered world, are we fully prepared to understand how we are evolving? It is in this context that I believe we have, indeed, taken a bite of the apple (no pun intended!).

It seems highly appropriate to me that Apple has chosen the logo of the bitten apple. Surely, it represents the acquiring of knowledge that came from the fruit of the tree of knowledge. We could argue for days on the theology of a story in which God would place such a tree in the Garden, with instructions to not touch it. But suffice it to say, Adam and Eve succumbed and the Exodus from Eden was not far behind.

My contention is that our own exodus from Eden today is a result of our evolution as a species. This evolution is a natural adaptation to our own technique as Jacques Ellul called it in the 1960's, perhaps understood as the application of and adaptation to our technologies themselves. Ellul understood the expansion of technologies in our society as geometric; fifty years later, I believe that he underestimated the expansion, which is probably more logarithmic. With each new breakthrough of our tool-making selves, we offer a new challenge of learning, assessing, adapting and usually assimilating the new technologies into what it means to be a 21st Century human being.

Such assimilation begins with the understanding of a new technology, usually pressed by the early adopters. I readily admit to being one of those; I, like many of you, tried desperately to teach Parti Software to folks who were still trying to understand how to turn on a computer; I drive a Prius, not because it saves me money, but because it is an elegant technology that has a chance to protect our environment. I enjoy the aspect of learning something new. This summer, I got hooked on So Duko, the logic game of numbers that requires not math skills, but thinking through possibilities. What totally fascinated me, however, was not the logic of the game as

much as watching myself learn how to play. I watched my perceptions change; show me today a block of 9 squares with the numbers 2,6,8, 9 and my brain immediately tells me 1,3,4,5,7 without my counting or even thinking about it. In fact, if I think about it, I will probably make a mistake. It is something new, it is elegant, it is attractive. I went from learning the game, to comprehending it at a deeper, more elegant level.

Historically, Early Adopters learn the technologies very well. For those who owned early Model T automobiles, the expectation was that the owner could, and would, perform most repairs and maintenance on their own. Today, computer diagnostics are required to discern what is wrong with an engine; and even that thorough understanding of the technologies doesn't tell us anything about the global warming impact of the vehicle (and though I drive a Prius, there is still a market for a Hummer!). For many of us here, our "understanding" of the computer began with instructions like push-pop, direct and indirect addressing, NOP, and FIFO stacks. But our understanding of the machine is far from our comprehending it.

To get closer to this comprehension, we have to revisit ideas we held closely during our early days of telecommunications. Lee Sproul and Sarah Kiesler (Connections: New Ways of Working in the Networked Organization, MIT, 1991) wrote in 1991 about Primary and Secondary effects of technology. Organizations adopting computers anticipated cost savings, but discovered a social interaction that quite took their breath away. In the Ecnnet community, we talked frequently about the power of Asynchronous Communication (the ability to communicate online and carry on a conversation while being at different places and different times) as "freeing us from the boundaries of time and space." The irony of such statements started to dawn on some of us, as we came to the clearer understanding that we were a creation, formed by our God, in a very particular time and a very particular space.

Could it be that we, as a species, continue our desire to be more and more like our Creator? That the image in Corinthians of "seeing in a mirror dimly" frustrates us, so we continually strive to see now face to face? So, we assault the Omniscience and Omnipresence of our

God with our technologies designed to stretch the boundaries of ourselves, to more fully reach the One who has created us. (David Lochhead undertook this challenge in his struggle with the Computer as a Tower of Babel, or a Pentecost Machine; it was insightful work then, and continues so now.)

The problem remains, however, that we are created as bounded creatures. In a true sense, that is the gift that we are given. Our struggle to work past the very gifts that we are given, to get “better” ones, remains a direct result of the bite of the apple—that is, it is part and parcel of our exodus from Eden, a God-created, bounded world, into a world of our own creation, albeit in an attempt, even if vain, to more completely reflect the Creator.

The model breaks down at this point. It is hard to justify internet crime, cyber stalking, or the destruction of others via technological harassment as being done “in the image of the Creator.” Surely, the problem of Evil stalks us throughout our evolution. One might be able to predict this particular piece of the struggle by looking at what is happening to our boundaries. The issue is one that psychologists—particularly R.D.Lang and his followers—call “Ontological Insecurity.” Boiling the problem down to its simplistic base, the ontologically secure know thoroughly where they end, and where others begin. They are truly their own selves. Extreme cases of ontological insecurity are cases of schizophrenia, or perhaps projection of one personality on another. Identity becomes critical to our social functioning; and yet, as we get out to the edges of our selves, those boundaries can become permeable, causing us difficulty.

Enter the thinning out of our boundaries, via telecommunications that empower us to “free ourselves” from the boundaries of space and time. We truly empower our words to go further and faster; we allow the interaction with worlds we may never visit, the worlds of other communities of souls not unlike ourselves. In fact, we amplify our power to interact, but we do it out of context. Freed from the boundaries of space and time, we are now empowering a small portion of our “selves” to interact in a way that could, certainly, empower community. But unfortunately, what happens all too often is that we become more vulnerable to the loss of our very selves. We become subject to the amplification of the parts of ourselves which

require feedback in order to be shaped socially, in a way that allows us to reflect the values core to our being, reflective of our creator and creation. Indeed, our very selves—our identity—becomes vulnerable to theft.

The problem rapidly becomes one of limitations of data. I thoroughly doubt that these limitations can be overcome by the addition of more data; because the data needs to be of a different sort altogether. Imagine for a moment, that we were creatures who were never exposed to any communication other than electronic. We have ample video, and are mesmerized by 250 channels of High-Def images; we have universal access to music individually programmed, and a world of pod-casts of thoughts from the greatest minds. We are born knowing how to type, and can instantly communicate with anyone in the world. (Oops, I forgot. That pretty well describes our kids!) Now, assume we suddenly escaped from our electronic wombs, and discovered other people. We explored face to face communication, and realized how powerful community can become! With what enthusiasm might we communicate this new "discovery!" Might we not become evangelists for this new "medium," that allows for touch, intimacy, and encountering of another?

Unfortunately, our current generation of young people came into the fray once the medium was already in place. How many of us worry about the fact that our grandchildren may never experience the tactile feel of a book? And the wonder of communication across space and time is nothing more than practical reality; so where will their minds go next? (Yet, remember, even a book is a technology, designed to communicate across time, to share ideas; perhaps another bite of the apple.)

There was a story on National Public Radio a few weeks ago, in which school-age children were given access to any communication tool thinkable—ipods, blackberries, cell phones with text messaging, instant messaging, you name it. They were all put in a room, and told to communicate. They did—and the experiment soon had to be stopped, because the kids all turned on one particular young girl, sending anonymous messages that degraded her over and over again until she was in danger of a complete breakdown. The story is

reminiscent of the Lord of the Flies; children and adolescents, not yet socialized, left to their own devices, amplifying the evil side of themselves. Perhaps the struggle with our creations is that we have not had the time to allow ourselves to learn how to socialize within this new creation.

One of the concepts Jacques Ellul brings into focus is the idea that technique (as he defines the application of technology) is quite irreversible. Certainly we may abandon old technologies; but we merely replace them with more powerful ones. So it is not likely that we will one day turn off all of our computers, and say, "that's it!" Such a Luddite approach would not cut it in a world that has increased its expectations of what is possible and desirable. As our evolution continues, if we have enough time to assimilate our values within the context of our new creation, we will no doubt adapt. With wisdom, we may find ways to establish boundaries again. Our values can drive our choices, as much about how we don't use technologies, as about how we do. As a very wise psychologist friend of mine taught me early in my ministry, sometimes the wisest course can be "don't do something, stand there!"

There is a group of people that has actively resisted technology, in a faith and values-based effort to do all they can to avoid the inevitable changes that would be accelerated in their society. I speak of the Amish; I came to admire them while I was a seminary student in Lancaster, Pennsylvania. Certainly there is a curiosity about a culture that has so much of a stand-offish approach to changes that they surely know exist. But the depth of their commitment, and the social context of their belief structure, became extremely obvious in the last weeks, when a Lancaster-area Amish community was assaulted by the attack on ten young girls from a one-room schoolhouse, carried out by a lone gunman who ultimately shot himself. Regina Brett, columnist in our Cleveland Plain Dealer newspaper, makes a powerful point, relating community and faith. She writes:

This time grief wore bon nets and buns, straw hats and beards.

Women in plain dresses hugged each other. Men in black pants shook their heads. TV cameras zoomed in on silos and cornfields. Newspaper headlines screamed, "Death of Innocents."

The innocents were Amish girls killed in a one-room schoolhouse. Would the shootings mean the death of innocence as well?

Charles Roberts came to the school in Nickel Mines, Pa., with shotguns, a semiautomatic, 600 rounds of ammo, a stun gun and - what made us cringe even more - K-Y Jelly. Police think he planned to sexually abuse the girls before killing them.

He shot all 10, then killed himself. Five have died.

The attack brought the Amish into our living rooms, through TVs that none of them own.

We rarely enter their world, except to buy rockers, tables and cheese. And when we do, we are the English who stare too long, whisper too loud.

We see them as backward people who shun electricity and fancy clothes for plain outfits, horses and buggies. The men wear the same bowl haircuts, the women wear the same white bonnets. There is no room for vanity, for self. Only room for God and others.

Years ago some friends introduced me to Mose Yoder. He had a white beard and dressed all in black except for his plain white shirt. He called his wife Mamma and was sometimes hard to understand. It was almost as if he spoke another language. He did, in more ways than one.

He used to say things like, "You can pray for potatoes, but grab a hoe." And, "There's a white dog and a black dog fighting. Which one will win? The one you feed the most."

He was a preacher of sorts and his stories grew so popular, he printed them in a little book called Golden Thoughts.

"How grateful are we?" he would always ask. That was his eternal challenge: to be grateful enough.

But the story that always got to me was his pineapple story. Here's how I remember it.

Mose was going to the store and thought of the widow down the road. So he bought a pineapple for her and one for himself. When he got home, one looked better than the other. He kept that one and gave her the smaller one. It haunted him. Every time he saw a pineapple he thought of that widow.

Mind you, he said this with a tone as if he had committed the gravest of felonies. He would tsk, tsk, and shake his head, scolding himself for his greed.

He finally bought her a big pineapple - and told her why.

In my mind he had already done good. He bought her a pineapple.

End of story.

But his life was based on four absolutes: Purity. Honesty.

Unselfishness. Love. At the time, mine was based on three absolutes: Me, myself and I.

It took me years to understand him. For this simplest of men, simple generosity wasn't enough.

For the Amish, there is no such thing as easy Christianity. They live with certainty that the man on the cross meant what he said:

Whatsoever you do to the least of your brothers, you do unto me.

This week the Amish reached out to the least.

They didn't call him a monster. They gathered and prayed. They invited his widow to their homes. They created a charity for his children.

The man who killed their innocents didn't touch their innocence.

He revealed it to the world.

(Regina Brett, Cleveland Plain Dealer, Sunday, October 08, 2006)

I do not doubt that there are people of such faith in the cyber community. It will require much of us all to help to shape a community, with a new sense of values. It will take respect. It will take the desire to build up, rather than to break down. It requires a willingness to say NO, to turn off the switch voluntarily as necessary. The capacity to make such changes, to devise the ways to adapt as a species to our own creations, all become part of the nature of a creature that is evolving in a cybernetic, virtual un/reality. Make no mistake, it is a reality that exists outside of the bounds of Eden. With knowledge has come power. With humility comes wisdom. However, with all four, comes responsibility.

II. Questions for David Lochhead

It is my intention to open a time of questions; I believe what I have shared probably leads to more questions than answers, and I believe a group like this is the best brain trust to ask to answer them!

But I began this adventure with the thought that, if I could ask David Lochhead any questions, what might they be? So let me share them with you.

1. David, you speak of our relationships with our artifacts. Ultimately, is it possible to have such a relationship, or is the relationship only with those to whom we connect through them? When our artifacts connect us only with ourselves (e.g., ipod) and serve more to isolate, how do we define or redefine that relationship?

2. In what ways do you experience the balance between boundaries and ontological insecurity, as well as permeability of those boundaries, as we move further out with our reach? (We used to speak of a "bubble" around Ecnnet, and debated at length whether that was a good thing or a bad thing).

3. What is the role of our technology as a "mediator" on our dialogue? That is, in some ways it serves as a lens through which I see my communication. What spin does it put on that communication? And how do we identify the inherent projection of ourselves, or emotions, or content not there, as we decode the message? Can we? Or is McLuhan right, the medium IS the message?

4. Can we more thoroughly reflect the image of the Creator, through our Creations? Or is it only when we discern the presence of the Holy? Is that possible? Where has your dialogue of Babel vs. Pentecost Machine taken you today?

5. What impact does evolution have on us, as a generation not rooted in (hard-copy) text writes in the "sand" of electronic media?

6. You stated clearly, "We become human in relationship. But we need to acknowledge that our relation to our artifacts is a relationship we need to tend." I applaud this challenge. In some sense, those gathered here are already those who go beyond being boundary-crossers, they are boundary SPANNERS. In what ways could you challenge us to use our unique place in this developing cyber society to tend those relationships?

