

Introduction

In 2009, I joined the [Unitarian Universalist Church of Arlington, VA.](#) (UUCAVA) Its website dated to the mid 1990s. The reality of the church and that of its online presence were completely out of sync. This observation led me on a three-year journey that resulted in a vision for a UU digital ministry.

I resisted getting involved at first. I was recovering from 15 years of working at companies that turned the Internet into a public experience: AOL Inc., Time Warner, Disney, Discovery, and News Corp. As the Internet evolved and moved more toward a consumer orientation, I focused on social-collaborative-learning networks for k to 12th grade students and teachers.

You cannot hope to build a better world without improving the individuals. To that end, each of us must work for our own improvement, and at the same time share a general responsibility for all humanity, our particular duty being to aid those to whom we think we can be most useful. —Marie Curie

I saw a connection between digital ministry and eLearning. Both enable the co-creation of knowledge and the practice of nurturing. To me, schools are as sacred as religious institutions.

My UU church at the time was working on building a relational culture. I was new to UUism, and it took me two months to figure out that “relational” was, in many ways, akin to my understanding of “social.” The “social” in social networking is: Digital gatherings in which human beings share life experience and know-how to manifest a higher good.

This was familiar territory for me. Professionally, I create digital services and products that make it possible for people to share, learn, and play games together at the same time. I’ve always considered online presence to be sacred. At AOL, I referred to the Instant Messenger’s Buddy List as the Inner Sanctum Sanctorum.

As messaging and community developed, more and more of life’s joys and sorrows played out simultaneously online and off. Videos and text

messages broadcasted live births. People had sex in chat rooms (AOL was “the house that sex chat built”); they dated; and they married. Quilters nationwide appliqued images of AOL icons on fabric blocks and collectively stitched a huge quilt that hung in the company’s Virginia headquarters. I sensed the hands of those women on that quilt. It physically illustrated how individuals could create a voice, a poem, or a work of art without being in each other’s physical presence.

Sorrows: Strangers who witnessed cries for help in chat rooms saved suicidal AOL members. Fireman and office workers texted, and IM’d final words of love to family through AOL’s systems as the Twin Towers fell and a section of the Pentagon disappeared. On that day, bomb threats at headquarters forced us to evacuate and work from home. AOL scrambled to keep the service up in NYC and Washington DC. And it did. Millions of people nationwide logged in and sobbed gut-wrenching expressions of horror in chats, forums, personal web pages, IMs, and emails. Just a few months after 9/11, AOL Time Warner published a book of all of the online public comments. It is an historical record of that moment.

A year later, AOL developed a digital memorial. More condolences, aftermath tales, and stories of hope found expression in the safe, sanctuary of AOL. Heather Crombie, my partner and spouse, was one of the memorial’s designers. Five million members lit digital candles that appeared on a map of the U.S. It blazed from coast to coast in a matter of days. Clicking on a candle revealed the thoughts of the writer.

These AOL stories barely scratch the surface of what 100 million people were doing online from the mid 1990s to the early 2000s. What a laboratory to learn in! I was privileged to work there. I felt responsible, as did all my colleagues, for the public trust bestowed on us by our members.

I was also lucky. My tenure spanned the last wave of AOL’s innovation. I was able to manifest many of the visions in my head. They resulted in six patents.

It also meant I was literally always “online.” I remember fondly the first time I sent my niece Stephanie a text message on a Blackberry made

specifically for AOL. I texted pastoral care from the shore of the

Potomac River. From her bed, she replied:  xoxox xoxox
xoxoxo Steph.

There's a dark side to my AOL tale. Nearly everyone who worked at the company stayed connected 24 hours a day. Most of us were sleep deprived from 18-hour-day office work. In my first year, I worked 6.5 days a week because I worked in the company's Tel Aviv office. Friday and Saturday constitute the weekends there. I worked Fridays because headquarters in Virginia avalanched weekly toward it, making it the most critical day of the week. I worked Sundays, the first day of the week in Israel, to plough ahead of the avalanche. Meanwhile, back in the states, ambulances often rushed people with chest pains and illnesses from the campus to emergency rooms.

On some level, everyone at AOL knew that 24-hour-a-day, always-on behavior makes people physically and mentally ill. And nearly everyone at AOL accepted it as the price to pay for innovation. For example, it was understood that laptops accompanied you in worship at the porcelain goddess. Co-workers and executives often looked ashen.

If you were in senior management and one of your kids, or a sibling, was in the hospital with a near-fatal illness, your boss might tell you to leave the hospital visits to the spouse. Industry colleagues have shared similar stories about life at Microsoft, Google, Yahoo, and Facebook.

Within the last two years, a convincing body of research has emerged that clearly demonstrates the deleterious effects of an "always on" lifestyle. Technology seduces. It can be an addiction and an accelerant for a variety of disorders and illnesses. It can easily make normally health individuals sick.

It has taken me five years to recover. I know that the human heart runs at church speed. And because of this, like me, younger generations will search more for flesh-and-blood community to help heal their deep longings and loneliness.

Once dismissed as the talk of Luddites, Internet addiction is now clearly real. For the first time, the 2013 Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders is to include a category on machine-human disorders. It is to recommend that [Internet Addiction Disorder](#) be studied more. Meanwhile, companies have begun to recognize that an always-on workplace [is hurting employees](#).

Executives at Facebook, Google, Twitter, Ebay, and other top Internet-based companies met recently at the first session of a new conference, Wisdom 2.0, to discuss the constant, unrelenting pressure and stimulation of responding to pings (instant and text messages), phone rings, workplace and system updates, and more.

“If you put a frog in cold water and slowly turn up the heat, it’ll boil to death — it’s a nice analogy,” said Stuart Crabb in a [recent New York Times article](#). He oversees learning and development at Facebook. People “need to notice the effect that time online has on your performance and relationships.”

Digital ministry has to grow and thrive for many reasons. But chief among them is that social media environments can exacerbate brokenness in those who already are in need of healing. Hundreds of millions of people worldwide are looking to the digital world for intimacy. We can’t ignore this for it is key to understanding the lives of many people 55 and younger in the U.S.A. - people whom we’d like to get to know in our churches and to prepare for now before they start to retire. They are people from whom we have much to learn, and for whom we have much to offer.

In [*Alone Together: Why We Expect More From Technology and Less From Each Other*](#), author Sherri Turkle, offers disturbing conclusions from decades of analyzing the evolution of human – computer interaction. They include the following conflicting points that describe the strain of our current digital lives:

- Online, we can find company but the constant prompting to post to Facebook, Twitter, and other social media queries exhausts us.
- The constant draw of sharing news to friends feeds fragile personalities in need of continual support and affirmation -

- personalities that rely on external affirmation instead of their own sense of inherent worth and dignity.
- There are signs that teens and young adults are buckling to the pressure and spending less time online. They are frustrated, hurt, and angry that their parents spend more time on their smart phones than with them. Some kids plea with parents to get off the phone and spend time with them.
 - Adults have large numbers of Facebook friends but in reality they have only one or two people offline they can talk to.
 - Connected life encourages us to treat people online the same way we treat objects – with dispatch.
 - Being alone is, ironically, a pre-condition for being together online. It's easier to communicate if you focus on your screen without interruptions.
 - Offline you might not be in control of other people, but online you are in control by creating your own networks, web pages, and Facebook profiles.
 - Networked, we are together, but our expectations of each other are low, leaving us utterly alone. If you aren't on Facebook for a number of days, does anyone notice or care?

Turkle, a licensed clinical psychologist and the director of the MIT Initiative on Technology and Self, is far from being a Luddite. She embraces digital life but emphasizes that the “holding power” of technology and social media can dramatically shape our own identities. She believes that human beings are turning to technology for love because in-person relationships are failing them.

The recent invasion of zombies in popular culture is an apt way to portray how people feel when “always on.”

“This is an issue that is as important as climate change,” said Susan Greenfield, a pharmacology professor at Oxford University, in a July 2012 Newsweek article that cites her work on how digital culture is rewiring us. “We could create the most wonderful world for our kids but that’s not going to happen if we’re in denial and people sleepwalk into these technologies and end-up glassy-eyed zombies.”

REACH: A UU Digital Ministry Program

UUism woke me up. I'm connected more but I connect less. My iPhone packs a wallop but it doesn't go everywhere with me. It distracts me from being mindful. I leave it at home or frequently turn it off.

As I began my UU journey, I realized I had to offer my expertise to move the church forward online. If I didn't, I'd violate core beliefs. As I worked on UUCAVA's online church, I hoped that other digital professionals in the Northern Virginia/Washington DC metro area would as well. A few have. After my church launched its online presence, fellow UUs encouraged me to create a model digital ministry program for UUism. The result is this program: REACH: A UU Digital Ministry Model.

Meanwhile, in the two years since the grant work began, more and more UUs nationwide started experimenting online. They collaborate through list serves and in Facebook. We now have several hundred like minds practicing their way into digital ministry.

A word about technology: All of the recommendations and content in this program reflect what is possible as of July 2012. The core principles of REACH will outlive changes in functionality for many years.

I'm not a minister. I have no seminary training. I'm a new, and lovingly naïve UU. Please help to make this program more effective by offering ways to bring out the theology and UU practices that are discussed herein. Leave feedback and comments at theNewUU.com in the REACH tab of the blog.

I hope that REACH gives you what you need to know and a few new ideas to explore. In Sept. 2012, I'll head off to a new startup with operations in Ireland as well as the U.S. I'll check the newuu.com and answer questions posted about the program there but hope that users of it help each other as well.

I hold you all in my heart online and off.

June Herold
Falls Church, VA
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