



The Unitarian Church in Westport

SERMON TRANSCRIPT:

Finding Our Souls in an Age of Mass Distraction

By Rev. Dr. John Morehouse

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It wasn't so long ago that I was sitting at the breakfast table with my five-year-old grandson, totally engrossed in my phone, switching back from my email, to the news, to Facebook. My grandson was telling me a story, and I was murmuring small affirmations and nodding my head until suddenly he stopped. It took several seconds for me to register that he had stopped talking. As a parent, you have a sixth sense that notices quiet as a sign that your child is doing something else. I looked up and he was staring at the phone in my hand. He stared at it for a long time, trying to determine what it was that would rob him of me. "I need you to listen to me with your eyes Grandpa." Wisdom comes in small packages.

These same children will grow up to embrace these screens to the detriment of all else including social interaction, school work, and reading. Screen addiction is a real and destructive phenomenon in our lives accounting for billions of days of lost productivity. And not just teenagers. More than once I have heard of those same teenagers admonishing their parents to put down their smart phones at dinner.

Addiction to screens, including addiction to video games, on-line gambling, and pornography, often requires help in the form of a support group and professional counseling.

More importantly is the loss of ourselves. Child development experts tell us that if a child is not taught to be alone from time to time, they are more at risk for feeling desperately lonely as adults. Constant connectivity to others through screens means our children are never really alone. (See Laurie Hollman, Ph.D [Unlocking Parental Intelligence: Finding](#)

Meaning in Your Child's Behavior) Technology at this level implies the loss of our attention to the rest of life, to the ones we love, even to our very souls.

This will not be a Luddite diatribe against the use of technology in our lives. The truth is that technology, especially these little screens we use day in and day out, actually do allow us to perform miracles. At our fingertips is more knowledge than even our ancestors three generations ago could have ever dreamed of having. We are able to communicate with one another like never before. Although I am not sure that what we are doing is really communicating but more on that later.

The fact of the matter is I can't imagine doing my ministry any more efficiently and carefully than I do it now. This little screen permits me to reach you by phone, by video, by text, snapchat or private messaging on any number of platforms, all of which I use, Facebook, Instagram and Twitter. I am able to hold meetings with colleagues across the nation and around the world through virtual meeting rooms like Skype and Zoom. This tool is powerful and often good. And the future, especially the future of human services through the advancement of artificial intelligence, is promising. Virtual doctors already exist, and promise to be even more so in developing countries.

And yet. And yet. We are busier now than we have ever been. The fact of the matter is that parents, yes parents in this room, yearn for a moment to sit still in the company of other adults and find some quiet and spiritual sustenance and not have to run their kids from one place to another. We know that finding volunteers in Family Faith Formation is a challenge, not because parents don't care, (they do), but because our lives are so over programmed. There just isn't time to be – well - spiritual. Can you hear me?

And these little screens and their bigger cousins, the iPad, laptops and monitors, literally demand our attention. And attention, our spiritual theme for this month, is what we crave for most in living a meaningful life.

Nicholas Carr in his ground breaking book [The Shallows: What the Internet is Doing to Our Brains](#) makes a compelling case that our reliance on the internet in general and these screens in the particular has actually changed the structure of our brain, reducing the size of our hippocampus, the center of our short-term memory. By relying on Google for our information we are losing our ability to concentrate for long periods of time as we once did when we would curl up with a good book. The constant ability to surf the web, or click through to the next link, has created a cultural attention deficit disorder which perhaps the prevalence of in children is but a symptom. When we can no longer immerse our consciousness into a book, its nuances, intertwined arguments and plot lines, we lose the ability to find our better selves.

I think it is no coincidence that the deep partisan divide in this country parallels the rise of sound bites and the staccato bursts of anger that we find echoing through the darker corners of Facebook and Twitter. The 280-character limit on a Twitter message only heightens this age of disruption as our own President has mastered with nefarious results. We may call this the Information Age, but it certainly isn't the Wisdom Age.

I have felt this in my own life. I love to read, or perhaps I love the idea of reading, curling up with a good book and really going deep to where the author, if she is skillful, will take me. But the reality is that I rarely read in that way. As your Senior Minister and the CEO of our busy congregation, I spend hours managing email, half of which are the many lists I subscribe to that I rarely open! (Don't worry, all your emails to me are filtered into my primary box, and I do read those – well most of the time, right?) I find my attention span for reading can only last 10- 15 minutes before I feel this pull to open my phone. Ten years ago, 30-45 minutes of reading was a regular part of my morning spiritual practice.

Now I read my books by listening to them on Audible, four or five a month. Why? Because I can do that while driving, and I do a lot of driving to meetings and seeing many of you.

I subscribe to several streaming services, which include religious and spiritual topics. I text more often with my kids than call them; jeeppers I do some of my best pastoral care by text with some of you! I have learned how to cull the internet for worthy and well sourced material, mostly because other colleagues have done that for me which I learn about through my Facebook groups. I don't spend a lot of time posting on social media mostly because I don't have the time for it. Although my staff would like me to do more of that.

I wouldn't say I have lost my soul but I do have to keep it close to me so that it doesn't wander off. Anyone else feel this way?

So what is to be done with our reliance, if not addiction, to our devices and the loss of attention these bring? The irony is that the internet has trained our minds to do what we are actually evolutionarily adapted to do; to let our eyes and senses wander across the Savanna. Out there is both nourishment and danger, just as in here (hold up phone) there is nourishment and danger.

Sherry Turkle who teaches sociology at MIT and is author of the book [Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other](#) says that forsaking technology is not the answer to finding our souls. Technology is here to stay and it is likely to become even more ubiquitous (imagine cerebral implants for instance). Turkle suggests that we learn to relate to technology by retraining ourselves to use it as a tool and not as a master. Turn off your alerts for instance, except for the one that reports how much screen time you had today. Put your phone on the other side of your bedroom, not next to your bed, or sadly in your bed, where you ought to be doing other things. Consider a digital Sabbath, one day or even a morning when you don't look at your phone, TV or any other screen. Declare email bankruptcy. Send a message to all those who wrote you that you have five thousand messages in your inbox and they will be deleted and if you have further business with me, try again. Go for a long walk and leave your phone at

home. That uneasy feeling you have by doing this, is just the separation beginning to work.

But even more so, especially if you find yourself unable to let go of that screen, consider getting help. No kidding. I did. You can too. Our Addictions and Recovery Ministry is here to help with support groups and other professional resources, so you are not alone.

While it may be challenging to find our souls again, in this age of mass distraction, a distraction that costs us so much personally and as citizens of the world, it can be done. David Brooks in his deeply satisfying book The Second Mountain: The Quest for a Moral Life , defines the soul as that part of us beyond the physical and mental that cannot be compromised, that part of us which dances as if no one were watching. Our soul is our character, our inner self, that still small voice within, or, as Emerson waxed, “the very perceiver of truth...the wise silence, the universal beauty.” We know it when we find it, the stirring of music, the rush of crisp autumn air into our weary lungs, the teary moment of watching your children play, the warmth of a touch.

Brooks suggests, and I concur, that we can find our souls only when we let go of what holds us to our pedestrian world. When Moses killed an Egyptian slave master for his treatment of a fellow Jew and fled Egypt to wander the wilderness and escape his identity, he had lost his soul. It was only when a lamb had wandered off from his flock that he finally found himself, lamb in his arms, far away from the familiar. There, and only there, did God come to him in the image of a burning bush to call him back to himself and his mission. Only in the wilderness did he find his soul. (Ibid, Brooks, Second Mountain) And so it could be for any of us who have lost that attention to self. The wilderness, or the wildness as Thoreau penned in Walden Pond, need not be far. It could be inside of us just waiting to be found.

I have done my share of wandering into the wilderness, both literally and figuratively. My practice of morning walking, without my phone, gives me that sense of return. But so

does a day spent with my beloved, doing nothing special except not checking my phone. I knew someone who had travelled the world and at the end of her long life, sat, often alone in her apartment. Far from lonely, she told me, she spent her time simply sitting, Zazen. With the journeys and turns of her memories as her soul guides. "Time" she told me "is so much richer now."

David Brooks talks about the Greek concept of Kronos. The deeper time, the time that actually slows down once we let go of all that is holding us. The time we feel when we are with the ones we love, or at the end of life. (Ibid, Brooks, Second Mountain)

Many times I have witnessed how facing a terminal illness reveals our deepest soul. The richness that comes from facing mortality focuses our life and its meaning like nothing else. It's not unusual to hear people speak of their disease as a gift, much as those who have near death experiences talk of the gift of returning to life. But we must be willing to travel both paths, positive and negative, if we are to really find our souls.

You won't find this meaning on your phone. You won't find it on Facebook. You might catch a glimpse, but the Leopard of death that stalks us doesn't show up virtually, only with all her strength and fear and hope, is she revealed to us, mere mortals that we are.

The same Grandson who implored me to listen with my eyes, now 16, sent me a piece from the late author David Foster Wallace who, having battled depression his entire life, took his own life at the age of 46. Several years before his death, Wallace gave the commencement address at Kenyon College. Unlike other addresses, Wallace suggested that the real power of education is in understanding the true nature of reality: beyond the distractions of screens and petty moments of self-location, there exists a freedom to truly pay attention to the wilderness of our minds, and the soul of our everyday living. Permit me to close with his words, which I find both haunting and inspiring:

"Our own present culture has harnessed these forces in ways that have yielded extraordinary wealth and comfort and personal freedom. The freedom to be lords of our

tiny skull-sized kingdoms, alone at the center of all creation. This kind of freedom has much to recommend it. But of course there are all different kinds of freedom, and the kind that is most precious you will not hear much talked about in the great outside world of wanting and achieving.... The really important kind of freedom involves attention and awareness and discipline, and being able truly to care about other people and to sacrifice for them over and over in myriad petty, unsexy ways every day.....That is real freedom. That is being educated, and understanding how to think. The alternative is unconsciousness, the default setting, the rat race, the constant gnawing sense of having had, and lost, some infinite thing.... It is about the real value of a real education, which has almost nothing to do with knowledge, and everything to do with simple awareness; awareness of what is so real and essential, so hidden in plain sight all around us...

“It is unimaginably hard to do this, to stay conscious and alive in the adult world day in and day out. Which means yet another grand cliché turns out to be true: your education really IS the job of a lifetime. And it commences: now.” (“This is Water,” Commencement Address, Kenyon College, 2005)

Blessings to you my beloveds. Now and always.