

Head in the Clouds:
Navigating Devotion and Dependence in the Digital Age

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The women in my life don't trust GPS.

I sit behind the wheel on a road trip from Washington D.C. to Long Island while my mother-in-law, riding shotgun, and my wife, sandwiched backseat between snoozing offspring, squint warily at my dash-mounted phone. They gibe and jeer every time the GPS's cheerfully detached docent dictates a strategy at odds with directions they apparently received on Mount Sinai. "Thou shalt take 278 to the Verrazano," so sayeth the Lord.

"Give it a chance," I implore. "The GPS is crowd surfing." I realize immediately that I've used the wrong term. Crowd *sourcing*, not crowd surfing. But no one corrects me and I don't correct myself. I smile a little, picturing a phone hoisted atop a sea of hands and casually recalculating its route while some metal band saws away on stage. "Sorry," I add, not all that sorry, "but I'd rather follow the GPS then head into God-knows-what on Staten Island."

Yet even I, dutiful devotee, have started to doubt as I notice our omniscient oracle guiding us steadily closer to Manhattan.

"I hope you know what you're doing," my wife wearily grumbles as we skirt Jersey City's overshadowed skyline. "This is madness!" my mother-in-law bellows as we weave into the Holland Tunnel. I ignore them. I'm sticking with my girl. Sure, she's lost reception, having presently maneuvered us beneath ninety feet of river and rock, but I'm keeping the faith. Driver and digital copilot, dragging with them a pair of back-seat skeptics, will any moment now emerge from these two lanes of foreboding fluorescence into a sunlit Manhattan devoid of traffic

and deserving of vindication.

The jam into which the GPS confidently delivers us, her casual sing-song betraying not a hint of trepidation nor an ounce of regret, holds us immobile in its thick-fumed snarl for two hours. I beg absolution from wife and mother-in-law. Both chuckle apocalyptically, then take to staring out the windows and commenting on mildly entertaining bumper stickers. They don't see one that reads, "A woman needs a man like a fish needs a bicycle," but I'm sure that old chestnut's on the tip of their tongues.

I glare at my phone. *How could you? How could you do this to me?* My phone stares back, stoic, silent, unabashedly adding minute upon minute to our arrival time and occasionally informing us with comic earnestness that traffic is building up and, don't ya' know it, we should expect delays. *Why? Why did I trust you?* Common sense, the wisdom of the matriarchs, the anecdotal evidence of East Coast commuters—all had unanimously and unequivocally pointed away, far, far away, from a midday detour through downtown Manhattan. Yet I, faithful advocate of the algorithm, humble servant of Silicon Valley, had wanted to believe. I had wanted it so much that I had justified every digital directive and silenced all deafening doubt. I had relinquished my freewill to a suction cup mounted, coaster-sized clairvoyant. And she had betrayed me with gridlock.

It had been a mistake to worship my phone. I know that now. Technology, even our most sublimely designed of streamlined delights, is without heart. Technology cannot care. And that which cannot care is unworthy of worship. Our species stopped worshipping the sun, moon, and stars long ago, not because we no longer appreciated their breathtaking beauty, nor because we no longer required their gravity and glow, but because we detected in these distant orbs impenetrable indifference. We could no more inspire their arc to bend than we could, back in the

day, captivate the attention of that pretty hair-twirler a few rows in front of us in middle school math. Perpetually unrequited, our ancestors turned from the sun, moon, and stars to divinity less visible to the eye yet more detectable by the heart. We chose to worship at the seat of love.

But our phones do not love us. Will not love us. Cannot love us.

We can love them, of course. The year Apple birthed the iPhone, an acquaintance brought this miraculous game changer to a dinner party hosted by a mutual friend. Never before had I beheld such a sublimely sexy piece of tech. I pressed its cold glass to my palm. I stroked its beveled edge. Yet, all too soon, the owner snatched it back, cupped the phone between his hands, and, between purrs and coos, said, “You know, Ben, it’s so perfect, I just, I just, I want to fuck it.” I replied only with a chuckle, but thought to myself: *I do, too.*

We may fancy our phones. We may cradle and caress them every hour, every minute, even. We may feel naked without them, our palms overexposed and our thumbs underemployed. We may have long ago passed the point of no return, the point when we could conceivably claim our digital sidekicks as optional accessories. Yet, for all our desire, devotion, and dependence, we receive dazzling functionality without an ounce of friendship. We press our faces to the glass yet remain invisible. Unloved. To pledge blind obedience to that which does not care, to that which cannot love, is what ancient prophets declared sinful but which I’ll demurely dub misguided. We deserve better than aloof insouciance from the gods before which we bow.

We are mistaken when we worship, but we are equally mistaken when we condemn. This wireless womb supports and sustains us. Nature’s abundance may feed, clothe, and shelter us from the storm; that abundance, however, is prepared, processed, and distributed via digital design. Even your favorite, fragrant farmers, decked out their finest denim and beaming over bushels of emerald chard, will take your credit card as payment and note your email for their

newsletter. How else, after all, will they let you know about their harvest festival and sign you up for their C.S.A.?

Not that a cogent defense of technology would give me much pause, as I stewed in traffic and sucked on taxicab exhaust, from rehearsing my own brand of rash recrimination. When it comes to all things tech, I wax melodramatic. A newly unveiled operating software will get me giddy and googly-eyed. A fumbled road trip and a malfunctioning GPS, on the other hand, provides more than enough fodder for any one of my well-rehearsed, hell-in-a-handbasket histrionics. I generally rev up this repartee with a David Foster Wallace quote (a recent fave: “we’re also, each and every day, part of the great Audience”ⁱ), season with a dash of Susan Sontag (“Humankind lingers unregenerately in Plato’s cave, still reveling, its age-old habit, in mere images of truth”ⁱⁱ), and then finish with a short but shudder-inducing reference to that magnum opus of digitally-inspired misgivings: *The Matrix*.

Reason suggests I not bite the hand that feeds, but I can’t help myself. This wireless world creeps me out. Whenever I walk into a cafe and see every caffeinated customer nose deep in a screen, I cringe. Every time I look up from my laptop on a Sunday afternoon to behold my entire family bathed by a streamed and serialized glow, I consider taking a hammer to our wireless router and declaring this the year we go Amish. I’ve read enough sci-fi and watched enough *WALL-E* to imagine where this is headed. I can picture our whole over-stimulated lot eventually swallowed by our fiber-optics, eight billion bodies fetal and frozen within individual prisons of glass and chrome.

My cringe-factor reached new heights recently while escorting my ten-year-old son, Lev, to the airport for his first flight as an unaccompanied minor. After checking his bags and receiving detailed instructions from the ticket agent, a sassy fifty-something who insisted on

calling me “Dad,” as in, “Now, Dad, just remember, you have to wait at the gate until the plane takes off and you get wheels up confirmation,” we threaded our way through security and emerged into the airport’s crown jewel: a newly renovated, high-ceilinged, cul-de-sac-shaped terminal with gates around the outside and a huge, open air restaurant in the center. Mounted at every seat of the terminal’s eye-of-the-storm, want-to-be bistro was a tablet upon which travelers could order food, check their email, or, what looked to be the day’s most popular option, play solitaire. Just in case these tablets failed to satiate the ample appetites of today’s media-crazed consumer, high definition televisions, offering closed-captioned news and sports, ringed the restaurant’s command center and floated by every gate. The concourse pummeled us with plastic and glass, a virtual hall of mirrors. Screens outnumbered faces, eye contact rendered obsolete. I gripped Lev’s hand a little tighter.

Hungry, we sat side by side on two swiveling stools and punched in our lunch order. Lev turned to watch Olympic highlights on one of the larger screens while I answered email on my tablet. When the food arrived, however, I turned our tablets around, fitting them into their stands with their backs to our food, and asked Lev to give the water polo match a rest. Then we sat there, father and son, letting our pizzas cool.

“How are you feeling?” I asked.

“A little nervous,” he answered.

“I know. Me, too. But I’m so excited for you. And Grandma and Grandpa will be there waiting for you at the gate when you land.”

Lev nodded, taking a tentative bite from a still steaming slice.

“Can I order soda on the plane?” he asked.

“Just no diet soda, okay?” I answered. “Too many chemicals.”

“But you drink it.”

“I know. But I’m done growing. And I only have it every once in a while. And you’re right, I probably shouldn’t. They have juice, too, if you want.”

He nodded.

I kissed his forehead. “I’m going to miss you,” I said.

Lev picked up a slice and started nibbling. Then, he swiveled back to the water polo match. I considered bugging him about this, but decided to let it go. I picked up my own slice, a thin, basil and sun-dried tomato affair, and ate in silence with my son.

Every aspect of that terminal’s ambiance served to inundate and isolate, but I had wanted, I had needed, a moment with my son, a moment I managed to milk as our mozzarella cooled. Creating space for said moment had required me to turn around our tablets and turn around my son, binding him for a few screen-free minutes to the somatic. I had held that wireless world at bay just long enough to foster a father and son, flesh and blood exchange, an exchange in which nothing noteworthy had occurred, nothing memorable had been said, but, by virtue of our shared anxiety, by virtue of the vertigo I felt having suddenly joined my father, and his father before him, as we beheld our children navigating life’s terminals without us, by virtue of all this, was an exchange I knew we mustn’t miss. And I’d be damned if I let the newest innovation in streamlined, digital dining take that away from us.

Yet, to cast a cruel eye at every counter-mounted tablet would require me to forget how, pizzas eaten, marinara mopped from chins, I had walked my son to the gate, waved goodbye, handed him off to a smiling but slightly harried flight attendant, and then had watched as his plane pushed off, circled the runway, and soared into the sky. To condemn technology would require me to ignore how that same plane had delivered my son, munching on his second bag of

complimentary Chex Mix, safely onto a runway in Milwaukee, after which time another flight attendant had escorted him to his grandparents. At no time whatsoever, during this inaugural expedition, was our wireless world uninvolved. I may have shut technology out to make space for the heart. But that same technology had carried my son safely through the clouds.

When we neither worship nor condemn, when we neither obsequiously iHunch nor hang our screens in effigy, we find ourselves simultaneously within and without, enthralled users and bewildered observers, thumbs swiping right while heads and hearts hem and haw. The digital age hath descended. Screens are everywhere, always—there’s no turning back. Yet, technology’s ubiquity only amplifies our dilemma. We may not know how to function without our phones, tablets, laptops, routers, but neither do we know how to function with them. What is *good* when it comes to this wireless world? How can we engage our exponentially proliferating technology with joy, compassion, wisdom, and grace? If, as Robert M. Pirsig so presciently penned a half century ago, “The Buddha, the Godhead, resides quite as comfortably in the circuits of a digital computer or the gears of a cycle transmission as he does at the top of a mountain or in the petals of a flower,”ⁱⁱⁱ how can we best navigate our way through these circuits and gears to this Godhead, this goodness? What collaboration with technology best serves our souls?

Wise and well-meaning handwringers answer such questions with a call for restraint. To live with joy and compassion, to survive the digital age with our humanity intact, they beseech us to press off and power down. “Don’t automatically walk into every situation with a device in hand,” preaches the sociologist Sherry Turkle.^{iv} Fair enough, Dr. Turkle. Sound advice. We have a right and, more so, a responsibility to turn around the tablets, making room for spoken word and silence, for the corporeal and the soulful, for offline life in its dazzling wealth of dimensions.

But when the screen break ends, when we’ve jumped back online to, say, pay our bills,

answer our emails, or text a friend, then what? Does the design of our tech demand disengagement from the good, the true, the heartfelt and the humane? Or can we, even in relationship with our screens, engage as soulful, spirited creatures?

Our ability to grapple with these questions, our capacity to prioritize and pursue goodness within our wireless world, will, both onscreen and off, affect the quality of our lives. For just as, with every call and text, stream and scroll, we imprint upon the wireless world, so, too, with every like and swipe, click and tap, *the wireless world imprints on us*. Hidden behind our backlit screens, a reflection, dim but discernible, stares back. We rarely notice this mirror image, but, when we lower our screen's luminosity, there we are. This reflection is pressed and impressed by every online move we make. We fashion and refashion ourselves in the image of our transactions. Surf with shallowness and be made shallow. Engage with depth and be deepened heart and soul.

Take Twitter, for example, a social media site that consistently dazzles me with its vapid, vacuous potential. And this from a sensitive, new-age guy whose Twitter feed draws rather homogeneously from TED Talks, Democracy Now!, the Dalai Lama, and Pope Francis. No amount of pith from everyone's favorite pontiff can counteract Twitter's aspartame aura. A few minutes of scrolling through the day's drivel of schmaltzy quotes and celebrity quips and I feel like I've raided my kids' Halloween stash. My stomach distends. My eyes sting. This is no feed but an emptying.

I have been counseled by publicists, agents, and editors to "dive in" on Twitter and "engage the conversation." More often than not, however, @benjaminshalva remains incapacitated, staring at his churning feed like a child afraid to dodge the ropes and double-dutch. Or a more apt metaphor—Twitter turns me into that guy at the party leafing through the

record collection. I'm not better, smarter, or holier than my actively tweeting brethren. I'm just a wee bit introverted and, believe it or not, at a loss for words.

A few months back, however, while I waited in a hypermodern wing of a recently remodeled airport terminal, my wife sent me a text message: "You have to listen to this podcast interview with Thomas Chatterton Williams!" She texted me the link to the interview. I had never heard of Williams, but, having a good half hour before my flight, I tapped the link.

Thomas Chatterton Williams, I soon learned, enjoys moderate notoriety as that *other* relatively young, verifiably hip African American expat living and writing in Paris. The one who's not famed journalist and Obama darling Ta Nahisi-Coates. Williams fell out of step with Coates and other compatriots by marrying a white woman, fathering light-skinned kids, writing a memoir about it, and then, verboten!, publishing a critique of Ta Nahisi-Coates' universally lauded *Between the World and Me* in the London Review of Books.

The podcast interviewers, themselves proud and noble nonconformists of the Jewish persuasion, quickly zeroed in on Williams' refusal to toe the line. How did Williams feel about writing against the grain? What was it like to depart from the canon of more racially-fixated black writers? Williams' response: "I've always thought that the idea of being a writer is that you purposely want to be writing from a lonely place. I never wanted to be writing in consensus with what my group tells me I'm supposed to think."^v

I paused the podcast, scrolled back, and listened to this answer a second time. Then a third time. Then a fourth. I scrolled back once more, this time playing and pausing after every few words in order to type Williams' answer into Twitter. I had just found a perfect opportunity to "engage the conversation." Williams' iconoclasm, articulated in the slightly stumbling cadence of one both searching and sincere, reached across a chasm of race and residence and spoke

directly to my heart. In his loneliness, I recognized my own. In his struggle to free himself from categorical imperative, I'd discovered a kindred spirit. A brother in arms. A worthy recipient of, at the very least, a shout out and thumbs up.

Confined by Twitter to 140 characters per post, I soon realized that I'd have to shave down the quote. I tried nixing any arguably dispensable phrases, but the more I drilled ellipses through Williams' words, the more I muffled its magic. I eventually gave up, erased this initial draft, typed: "Loved this podcast - great interview with @thomaschattwill!", attached the link, and launched the tweet. Then I grabbed my bags and boarded the plane.

Once snugly folded into economy class, I again pulled out my phone, curious to see if anyone had responded to my post. Mark Oppenheimer, the podcast's delightfully savvy, deliciously snarky MC, had "liked" my tweet, his approval indicated with a tiny, shaded heart. I felt a slight endorphin rush, thrilled that my tweet proved worthy of his tap.

"Sir, please turn your phone to airplane mode," a flight attendant scolded.

I sheepishly nodded, dodging her evil eye, then turned back to my phone. Just one last look. We'd reached the runway. The plane began to pick up speed, engines roaring, tray tables clattering in their casements. Keeping my hand steady, I opened Twitter's notifications panel. There, above Oppenheimer's little valentine, Twitter had now delivered a two word reply from Williams. It read, quite simply and, though I could be projecting, sweetly: "thank you!" The plane lifted skyward and soared through the clouds.

I don't imagine that Williams, perhaps spying my tweet while munching a croissant from his corner boulanger, gave my shoutout more than a moment's notice. I'm not expecting to see our exchange eloquently rendered in his next article for the New Yorker. Our to and fro was typical Twitter—terse, trivial, a tip of the hat answered with a token nod. As I scrunched in my

window seat, however, surrounded by strangers, as our anonymous assemblage did its darnedest to avoid eye contact and evade conversation, I imagined a tiny, thin thread of light extending from my navel, spooling its way beyond the body of our Airbus, out across the Atlantic, diving down into a maze of Paris boulevards and finding its way to Williams. Through that glowing gossamer flowed gratitude from me and, from Williams, knowingly or unknowingly, intentionally or unintentionally, blessing in return. However brief, inconsequential, and, these last few paragraphs notwithstanding, forgettable—we had created connection. And I, for one, a wandering rabbi turned writer laboring on the margins, culturally bound yet desperate for self-determination, felt less alone.

Twitter gets partial credit for our connection. Though this hydra of a thousand hyperboles continues to spew sludge across our screens, a tower of babble all but toppling under its mass of glib and gall, Twitter also opens channels, furthers conversations, and facilitates connection. My approach to Twitter—my mindset, my intention, my satisfaction with superficiality versus desire for depth—determined my experience. When frozen mute before my feed, I offered nothing. I received nothing. I skimmed and I scrolled and wasted my time. Then, from a far off land, a writer’s words woke me up. Inspired me to reach out in appreciation. Moved me to get up from the record collection and, after a few gulps of Merlot, commune with the living. On Twitter, online, on screen, we reap what we sow.

ⁱ Wallace, David Foster. “Fictional Futures and the Conspicuously Young.” *Both Flesh and Not*. Back Bay Books. Reprint Edition. 2012. P. 46.

ⁱⁱ Sontag, Susan. *On Photography*. Picador. 2001. P. 3.

ⁱⁱⁱ Pirsig, Robert M. *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*. William Morrow and Company, Inc. 1974. P. 26.

^{iv} Turkle, Sherry. *Reclaiming Conversation*. Penguin Press. 2015. P. 319.

^v Unorthodox Podcast (Tablet Magazine). Episode 55: “Teach Your Children Well.” August 25, 2016. Min. 33:00.