

Mental Obesity

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“The pursuit of maximum moments drives many a multitasking life and an often-distracted mind,” writes Carolyn Curiel in her recent New York Times opinion piece. “We think of America as a sleep-deprived nation, but we are becoming deep-thought deprived, too. A closed door does not stop interruptions, because we are packing the weapons that can shatter concentration or quiet contemplation. Our fingers are always on a button.”

Even before computers, cell phones, and other wireless technology, the radio was placed in homes and then cars, helping to fill the dead air that accompanies housework and long rides. But now, technology has pushed our escape from quiet thought to dizzying new heights where we never have enough time to mull over a question that requires a long, complicated answer, because we’re constantly beckoned by a million distractions. In the Information Age many of us are a mile wide and an inch deep.

The following words, spoken by Francis Schaeffer decades ago, are increasingly relevant to our generation: “No one seems to want (and no one can find) a place for quiet,” he notes, “because when you are quiet, you have to face reality. But many in the present generation dare not do this because on their own basis reality leads them to meaninglessness; so they fill their lives with entertainment, even if it is only noise.”

Such escapism makes sense for non-Christians, yet most Christians act the same way — escaping from meaningful thought through the distraction of technology. I can remember many times when I’ve felt particularly thoughtful, but then the computer would beckon me. Ten minutes later I would have read a few emails, checked the comment section of our blog, browsed Google News and in the end, entirely lost my train of thought. Oh well, it probably wasn’t important. Was it?

Afraid Of Our Own Thoughts

When was the last time any of us took just twenty, undistracted minutes to think about deep, substantial things, like our future or our relationship with God? Did you know that we probably couldn’t? Through media our minds have been conditioned (or perhaps de-conditioned) to avoid deep or prolonged thought. We must constantly be moving and doing, but never thinking and planning. Every empty space must be filled with music or movies or Internet or texting or IMing. Every empty space must be filled, except the one between our ears.

By God's grace nearly every distraction we face has an ON and OFF switch, a STOP and PLAY button, or an OPEN and QUIT option. Though technology is increasingly prevalent and our generation faces a media onslaught 24/7, we are not forced to watch, listen or play.

We don't have to listen to our iPods while we're doing the dishes. We don't have to text message anyone while we're riding in the car. We don't have to surf the Internet while we're doing our homework. We don't have to play video games after dinner.

Ironically, we can quit, close or turn off all of these distractions, but we can't do the same to our minds. Our minds can't be shut down. They can only be overpowered, distracted, corrupted and/or atrophied, and that is exactly what our culture is trying to do to them.

I'll be honest, when I have to do a monotonous job like washing the dishes, weeding the yard or mowing the large field at the front of our property, the first thing I reach for is my iPod. When I'm bored my first inclination is to get on the computer and surf the Internet.

The questions I have to ask myself are: "Is there really so little in my own brain that I couldn't occupy myself for a little while with my own thoughts? Has there really been no sermon or book or passage of Scripture that has sufficiently challenged me recently that I could meditate on and think about?"

We fail to realize what an insult it is to our own intellects that we can't occupy ourselves with our own thoughts but must be constantly entertained by other things. We fail to see how dangerous it is not to ponder important questions about who we are and where we're going.

"As Christians," writes Schaeffer, "we must follow God's absolute moral standards, and we must not be robbed of a place of quietness with God." (See Eph. 5:18-19)

"Both in theory and practice Christians can dare to face the realities of life unclouded," he concludes. "We do not need these things to fill the crannies of our lives. In fact, we should want to face reality: the glory of the world God has created and the wonder of being human — yes, and even the awful reality of the Fall and the tragedy of marred men and women, even our own flawed character. We are not to be people of escape. The Christian is to be the realist. To face reality as born again and indwelt by the Holy Spirit is the Christian's calling."

Technology Is Not The Problem

Of course, the problem is not with technology — Schaeffer was addressing these same issues long before Steve Jobs ever dreamt of the iPod. Rather, the problem is the way and the frequency with which we have decided to use technology. This means that for most of us the question is not whether to have a cell phone, but instead whether the cell phone will be helpful, used as a tool, or distracting, used as a toy.

There are countless profitable ways to occupy our minds, even with the gadgets that often distract us. I almost exclusively use my iPod to listen to sermons or other audio messages that stretch and strengthen my mind, I frequently find thought-provoking articles online and I occasionally have IM conversations that I feel sharpen me.

The key is to make sure that our use of technology is supplementing our thought life, not distracting from it; that it is providing opportunity for deep thought — not keeping our minds constantly busy dealing with new articles, IM conversations, and song lyrics.

Just as it is ridiculous to think that a constant intake of food will benefit our bodies, it is also ridiculous to think that a constant torrent of information will improve our minds. Like food, information must be carefully selected and properly digested to fulfill its God-given purpose.

Unfortunately, the selection and digestion process takes time that our generation lacks because we can't say no to mental distractions. We're constantly feeding our minds mental snacks but never allowing for quiet reflection or thoughtful meditation. Worse still, we're feeding ourselves "junk food" thoughts — high entertainment value, all sugar, and no nutrition.

The result is a generation of fatties. If you think physical obesity is a problem in America wait until you see our nation's brains. Mental obesity is the curse of the Information Age.

If we want to lose mental weight we'll need to go on a radical diet — cutting the fluffy junk food and replacing it with solid, nutritious cuisine. We'll need to get off our behinds and start exercising. We'll need to do hard things by thinking hard thoughts.