

Digitalis: Life in the Age of Silicon
A Sermon offered at Countryside Church Unitarian Universalist
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My first computer was an Apple Performa 6300, in 1996. With my love of science fiction you'd have thought I'd have one sooner. But, I wasn't going to get one – I'd even preached a sermon on apples and other suspicious fruits – a diatribe against these prying, dangerous computing devices. Besides, they were a lot of money, and that was in short supply. My tech savvy cousin Laura came for a visit. She took me to a computer store, set me down in front of an Apple, showed me how to start it up, open a program, and – well – it blew my mind. Like – omigod! It could do everything! You could surf the world wide web. You could e-mail! ... write sermons, open a recipe program, make artwork, enter worlds of fantasy, and you could play games. Just point and click, drag and drop, boot up and travel to distant stars. Well – that's how it felt. I fell head over heels.

It was a sparkling companion, a teacher, playground, a connection to friends. It was like having a piece of the starship enterprise in my home. Anything was possible. Compared with my macbook air, at the back of the sanctuary displaying the pictures on our screen, it was probably slow and clumsy – but it was like a genie in a bottle. It was more than a mere instrument to get things done. It transformed my life. On that computer I filled out my application to Theological School in Chicago and emailed the school to set up a visit that spring. That fall, I packed it like a baby in my car, to travel from Atlanta with me and my 2 year old Chava to start school. When I unpacked it in our apartment in Hyde Park I hugged it hello.

Amazing machines! You can span the globe, touch the world, laugh, weep, make music, and save lives. This silicon-based reality is dense with possibility.

Years later, I got an iPhone 4s -- That's the phone with Siri. She can answer simple questions, look up directions. Mostly, she's annoying. Two thirds of the time, she can't understand what I'm saying – she mangles the names of towns, businesses. One day – exasperated – I lost my temper. "Siri!", I said, "you're an idiot!" She doesn't carry on much of a conversation normally – I've tried – but this time, as I said that she was an idiot – she responded – "Well, I am still here for you."

The possibilities of the silicon emergence were expressed dramatically in the recent movie, "Her". I knew, even before I saw it that I'd have to reflect on it with you. Theodore, the main character, picks up a new operating system – it'll be his computer, phone system, home systems operator. It has a voice, personality, the capacity to learn, and to appear to understand and even have feelings. Her name is Samantha. Like me and my old Apple – Theodore falls in love with Samantha – well – not just the same. It's more intimate than what I felt for my Apple. Samantha's always there for him, not too passionate or too distant, always interested in him, fascinated by the world he shows her through the lens of her camera eye. She's multi-talented, smart, funny, warm... but wait – she's a robot without a body and her feelings – even Samantha asks – are these feelings real or just part of her program? Theodore doesn't seem worried about it. He's blissfully happy.

Then, again, he's not in relationship with a real person – he's in love with the perfect image of his perfect woman. This is a lot less complicated, after all, in theory, she won't have any conflicting needs, won't want to eat at a different restaurant, see a different movie, have a headache. When I turn off my phone – Siri takes no offence – it might be harder for me if, when I powered down my phone, Siri said – oh no! not yet! or I'll miss you! Samantha brings an intimate relationship to Theodore without the challenges or drawbacks of having to compromise with, put up with the idiosyncrasies of, process with, or even tolerate a real person.

The film was the perfect appetizer – for a book that I was about to read entitled *Alone Together: Why We expect More From Technology and Less From Each Other* by Sherry Turkle. Turkle is Professor of the Social Studies of Science and Technology at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. The book is just one of the products of her work as the Director of the MIT Initiative on Technology and Self. Her research looks at the relationship of humans to machines and technology.

Turkle studied the relationship between children and those electronic toys – James and Lea had them – called Tamagotchis. Tiny robot pets without arms or legs. They made happy and sad sounds, got hungry, tired, sick, lonely, bored, and, sometimes they died – but when they did it was simply a death that required rebooting. Researching, Turkle discovered that most children had intense relationships with their Tamagotchi's. They loved and tended them and when they died – most didn't want the small plastic pet to be rebooted – not because they just wanted another Tamagotchi – but because they'd built a relationship with that one and if it was restarted it wouldn't be the same. Turkle wrote:

“Many children aren't .. eager to hit reset. They don't like having a new creature in the same egg where their virtual pet has died. For them, the death of a virtual pet is not so unlike the death of what they call a “regular pet.” Eight-year-olds talk about what happens when you hit a ... reset button. (One said), “It comes back, but it doesn't come back as exactly your same Tamagotchi. . . . You haven't had the same experiences with it. It has a different personality.” A little girl named Sally, after a Tamagotchi died, told Turkle, “I am not going to start up my old one. It died. It needs its rest.” The phrase that the children and Turkle used was – alive enough. Alive enough to need care, to die, and to need rest.

Furbys had the advantage of cuddlesome fur and since then, there have been all sorts of robotic toys that have bewitched children – to the point that many of the children that Turkle studied – said that it was easier to love a robotic pet because, even though it died, it didn't die the same way that people and pets do. Children would distinguish between a “people kind of love” and “robot kind of love.”

My dolls and stuffed animals growing up required imagination and effort to make them live. These robotic toys, Turkle wrote: “do not wait passively but demand attention and claim that without it they will not survive. With this aggressive demand for care, the question of biological aliveness almost falls away. We love what we nurture; if a Tamagotchi makes you love it, and you feel it loves you in return, it is alive enough to be a creature.”

Our lives are increasingly mediated by machines. There's a TV ad for a robot vacuum cleaner that keeps cleaning your house even when you're out. People greet their vacuums and dance robotically with them. Turkle wrote about homes for the

elderly where they're using furry robots to keep lonely residents company, they've been catching on particularly in Japan. It almost sounds like a good idea. The residents, for the most part, bond with the furry machine, give it a name, a place to sleep, hold it. It costs 6,000 up front – but it doesn't need a salary or time off work. When I was a girl we used to visit my grandparents in the Jewish Home for the Aged every Sunday. It was hard. It smelled funny and took a lot of time. Suppose we'd just given them a fuzzy robot to cuddle with. We have a Lay Ministry Team that, when they know about illnesses or challenges here at CCUU, will make calls, visits. Imagine, instead, that we had a few Parobots – you can pick one up from a distributor in Itasca. We'd have them stacked in a closet with their pacifier chargers on so they'd be all juiced up. We'd just pull one out and drop it off. They're cute – but even before Professor Turkle mentioned it this made me think of the work of Harry Harlow at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, in the 40's and 50's with baby monkeys. Harlow rigged up fake mothers for baby monkeys. There were rough “mothers” of wire, with milk for the babies and there were soft mothers that the babies could touch and cling to. The babies always preferred the cuddly mothers – even when they had no milk at all. The babies preferred the cuddly ones even when they'd shoot blasts of air, hit the babies or shake them violently. The babies would keep clinging. I have no doubt that if a real mother monkey showed up – the babies would have preferred her – but I think that we're enough like little monkeys that we might go without more sustaining relationships or believe ourselves sustained even with a shallower relationship just to feel connected. It'd be better to have the robot than nothing – maybe. Why should those be our choices? Where are the human beings, the human touch?

How many of us have a smart phone, tablet, or computer? These things were supposed to make things easier, save time, and help us get more connected.

They *can* make things easier – when they work – but when they don't, because we've given them so much power – it's a mountain of stress. We've saved time – but instead of finding time on our hands, we're just doing and are expected to do more of everything faster. Like Charlie Chaplin in *Modern Times*, we can be caught up, serving the machine at it's pace, instead of the machines serving us. They're changing us in ways we don't seem to control.

They're shaping our consciousness and, as we work to build computers with the signs of feeling and with what we call intelligence – it redefines and challenges our understanding and the value of our human intelligence.

Sure, we're “friends” with more people than ever. But it's often more breadth than depth. When things happen in someone's life – you can click like instead of taking the time even to send a text, much less an email, a letter, or phone call. The person may not even be a close friend – only an acquaintance with whom now you are linked to until you unfriend them. It's easier to click like than to truly communicate – which takes more than words. And, as we communicate in shallower and briefer ways – we've become less and less capable of tolerating the challenges of real time, real human relationships. It takes time to have a real conversation, to go deep.

It's not just that we're spread thin with tons of friends and twitter followers. We're losing the skills that help us to be human together. The art of civility, the

ability to listen well, tolerance for differences, the ability to see nuance. Not that it was ever easy. This being human – it's work. This being mortal, having a body, emotions has always been a challenge – it's why we need poets, artists, musicians, philosophers, and even preachers – to help us wrestle with this complicated being. Being in relationship just magnifies the challenge.

We need to use the tools of the machine without becoming, ourselves, the tools of the machine. It's easier to harvest on Farmville than to have a real farm or to sit down and work out differences with another human being. It's easier to track, graph, and quantify objects and actions, answer email, or text, easier to create a powerpoint, than to get messy and human.

It's easier to have a magical warrior avatar in a virtual reality than to be simply and complexly oneself – quirks and all – authentic. Our friend Deb Laufer wrote a play about the fine line between the world of computer games and warfare with drones. It was at Steppenwolf for Young Adults this week.

People in so-called polite society have always wanted a certain gloss, even conformity, some polite distance; computers and their digital kin give us that and more. They speed us up. They can push us farther and farther apart. They can give us more technical efficiency but not the skills to be human and earthly. There is no app for that. They may give us the world while we put our souls at risk.

Why think about this here? Because this is a faith community – and the safeguarding of the spirit of life is our core responsibility. We have a facebook page, as do many faith communities, we have our website, people may find us through some of our meet up groups. We email, send out weekly electronically updates. Sometimes we even conference call or Skype a meeting – it's been particularly true this snowy winter. But as a faith community we need to be clear when we do these things. So that, as we expand electronic media or use social media we remember that the medium is the message, for us the message is everything, and our message is about the power of love, the dignity of the spirit, and the oneness of all being.

Take a deep breath – and a moment to feel your heart beat, the blood circulating through your veins, the movement of air in and out of your lungs. You are the part of the great and improbably miracle of life. Here's the thing to remember: While we're a part of a tremendous interdependence, and we're all one spirit – we're only successful as a species, thriving as people, because we are different, each bearing a different portion of the truth, each with different insights and gifts, a unique mind and heart that, when revealed, always offers up a piece of the human puzzle, a flash of poetic wonder, a poignantly human heart. It is authenticity that gives us that revelation into one another. It is our great beauty as beings – as human beings – this authentic, living, unrepeatable, complicated, creative spirit. Feelings, thoughts, quirks, learning curves, flourishes – these are our sacred possessions. We are given the gift of seeing them in one another all too rarely – but if we rush through life with our noses pointed toward a screen we will miss the moment we are given.

Why think about this now? Well – you may have heard the President say this week that we are building Iron Man. We know that our lives have been uploaded by powers and politics beyond our reach. From all the signs, this is what Sherry Turkle calls the Robotic Moment. We are turning a corner as a world and we need to do it

with full awareness. The President laughed when he announced Iron Man – as the remake of Robocop is coming out in theaters. This is the robotic moment – when our society is so intoxicated with the possibilities of all this new creation – and so afraid of the future that we hope that these machines – if no one else – can save us. Technology will have an answer. This is the Robotic moment – the machines that we've created are pressing upon, rushing us forward, teaching our children how to see the world – whether or not to cherish real life like, Turkle's daughter seeing the Galapagos turtles – or even how to recognize it if they see it. Robots to care for the elderly, drones to kill our enemies at a distance, computers to anticipate our needs by reading our pulse, heart rate.

It all seems unsettling and speaks of a dystopian future – so much of the technology is as amazing as my old performa was – opening worlds of excitement and a sense of power that is seductive – intoxicating. I have my iphone, my mac air, I love to create and see the screen presentations I make for you each week, I wear a fitbit to get me exercising. And yet these are not toys – they are part of a swelling moment in history that we must approach awake or be swallowed by it. Let us be wary and wise.

We are called though it may be a small voice in these times – we are called to take a stand for breathing, carbon based, vulnerable, overpowering, clumsy, creative, often lost, exhausted, finite, and infinitely worthy life. We are called to move in history awake and aware. To be present to one another, to celebrate the sacred uniqueness of each soul and the breathing unity, beyond calculation, of all that is. We are called not to be servants of the machine – but to be stewards, witnesses, allies, guardians, and lovers of life.