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Face to face in a technological age

How do we honor the face of our neighbor when so much of our technology treats face-time as without value? When Yahoo CEO Marissa Mayer’s plan to bring people to back to work on the Yahoo campus, so that they would actually be together, was greeted by Forbes magazine with the condescending headline: “Back to the stone age?”

How do we honor the face of our neighbor in a technological age? We can begin by acknowledging that technology is a faith issue. It is a moral issue. Technology is more than tools. It is an exercise in human creativity in managing, and using, the materials of our world. Technology bears on how we view and treat the earth. It bears on how we view and treat our neighbors, and it has all sorts of unintended consequences.

Technology is a faith issue for even deeper reasons. We build our values into what we make. My dissertation advisor used to bring a mechanical eggbeater to class, the kind with the hand crank on the side and the bevel gears in the center that directed the rotation of the crank down into the beaters. The young men in the class couldn’t fit their hands into the handle; their hands were too big. A gender value was built into the tool, a judgment about which gender should do which kinds of work.

So technology is not the value-neutral application of scientific findings. It embodies the values and beliefs of those who make it. The dominant technological culture that has come to penetrate our globe grew out of Christian Europe. That is where the tradition of mechanics and engine-making grew, from the late medieval period on, and where people first built the electrical apparatus that would give rise to the ubiquitous electronic devices of our time. The Americas contributed mightily, but remember that they were increasingly populated by immigrants and refugees from Christian Europe. I wonder, as do many other scholars, what it means that the roots of our dominant global technologies lay in lands once united in a Christian faith.

Consider for a moment the famous text from the second chapter of Genesis, in the Hebrew and Christian bibles: God stooping down to breathe life into a handful of dirt, creature and the Creator face to face. In creation God was face to face with humankind. God breathed on us. There is a divine and perfect efficiency in this image of God creating the human from the lump of clay. We see perfect unity of intent and outcome, no waste, no left-overs, no friction to drain away precious resources.

What is God not doing, in this image? We do not see God calculating and measuring, which is the way we achieve efficiency. We do not see a value that we would call technological. We see something existential, something fundamental about being. We see the face-to-face posture of love.

This is also a posture of irreducible mystery, and technology does not like mysteries; they are too hard to control. We see this mystery in many of our languages, in which the words for breath are
all tangled up with the words for soul, spirit, air. Think of the resonance between the words *spirit* and *respirate*. And what of the great guttural *ruach* of ancient Hebrew? It names the wind of God, the spirit of God, and the breeze of the cool of the evening. Think, too, of the mysterious bond of parent and child. Is there anything sweeter than a puff of newborn baby’s breath?

Genesis holds up for us an image of being face-to-face as mysterious and joyous, as beautiful and infinitely valuable. Many of our technologies tell us that being face-to-face is wasteful and inefficient. Others use face-to-face mannerisms to manipulate us, and teach us to accept a mask of humanity.

What, then, can we do, to honor the face of our neighbor, among the machines? We can look for it, and when we can’t find it we can recognize its loss, and long for it.