

SOCIAL CRITICS – October 2006

— By Richard L. Kiniry

Being an old or at least an aging curmudgeon, I hope I am given a break by the younger generation and will be forgiven just a bit for my negative view of contemporary life. I am known for my bewilderment at automobile seat-warmers and like many people my age I am always ready with a new joke about people on their cell phones. (They keep trying to hit me as they drive, talk on the phone, and turn corners.) But although I disapprove of our insatiable urge for more and more comfort, my issue is: what are all the so-called advances in technology doing to us? Does it make any transcendental difference that because of my very helpful computer, I no longer know how to spell or count?

With the Industrial Revolution and the factory system enormous wealth was produced and human beings were freed from the feudal system but life also became more regulated and controlled. Pride in one's work was replaced by acquisition of the things those factories produced. My father came of age in the era of the automobile. He loved his first car because it got him out of a house with too many people. Not only could he take trips around the country, he could get back and forth from his job in a half-hour (it would have taken a hour and a half by public transportation), and he car pooled. In those days you didn't waste a ride on just one person. Dad never went to work in a car with fewer than three people. I don't think he ever imagined how the automobile would transform our politics, economics, and life-styles. (How many babies have been conceived in the four-wheel bedroom?)

The blessing of the automobile has in many ways turned into a curse. Besides pollution, crowded streets, suburbs and destroyed neighborhoods, consider the effect of the automobile on human nature. I'm not sure why but the automobile enhances human aggression. We sit in a metal box that can not go through or easily around other metal boxes, and since the metal box isolates us from the faces of other drivers, even a city street becomes a contest of speed and advantage. I believe this behavior spreads through to the rest of life. The lessons learned on the highway become the rules for relating to friends, family, and strangers. The automobile has made human nature more frustrated and aggressive.

In the last twenty years we have had a electronic revolution, the latest technology- driven transformation of culture. Small children and grandmothers are emailing friends and family and using the internet. Everyone seems to have something in their ear. If it isn't a phone, it is an ipod. Recently as I was searching a supermarket shelf, I thought the woman next to me was talking to me, but no. Then I thought she was on the phone, but no, there was no cord or device in her ear. As far as I could tell she was not crazy but I surmised that she was so used to talking that she has an ongoing conversation to no one in particular.

And that seems to be an appropriate metaphor for the effect the electronic revolution has on human nature - a constant conversation. Human life has always been a conversation but until our

present times that conversation was happening in our heads. It is new that we can be in continual verbal connection with our personal circle. As I eavesdrop on the constant conversation it tends to be about what he or she did to me, what a great time I had last night or what a great time we will have tonight, where are the kids? and money on all levels. In other words, every thought gets feedback.

To be fair, maybe this is good. Maybe in an age that supposedly lacks community and with everyone bowling alone, this constant communication is progress. Or maybe like television, the great promise of electronic communication will turn into another level of mindless chatter.

My point is, when it comes to new technology we should not just accept the inevitability of so-called progress but be social critics and take a longer view. We can reject some uses of new technologies. Does constant conversation destroy independent reflective thinking? Too much of any good thing can kill you and although advertising makes jelly of our better judgment, we should make choices and express our opinions to the world.

— Exploring values such as integrity, honesty, responsibility, courage and
commitment.

— Affirming the value and uniqueness of each individual.

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— Promoting knowledge and celebration of diversity among people.

— Inspiring social responsibility toward individuals, groups and our
environment.

— Developing identity as part of a community of people sharing humanistic
values.

— Learning about those ethical teachings which are common to the world's
religions.

