

## Leader's Message

### *Hello, Can Anyone Hear Me?*

— Richard L. Kiniry

When you come upon someone texting in the middle of a sidewalk or in a store aisle, are you expected to say excuse me or just stand there waiting for them to notice you? Is there any place you shouldn't take a cell phone call? After experiencing an increasing number of e-mails each week, have you decided to just ignore most of them and claim you never received them?

We are in a changing world. Not only is it getting hotter and salt water is rising but technology is changing the way we relate. Seemingly some people, usually younger people, are in constant communication with friends and family. They are always talking, and yes, I think it is talking, since e-mailing and texting are not actually writing.

What happens to the human race when technology changes the way we function and relate? What did the first wheel do to the human sense of distance, our dependence on craftspeople, the status system, the economic system? Did the people who couldn't afford or didn't like the new technology of the wheel just die off or get run over? And will all our present day improvements in communication become standard for all except the poor and the refuseniks?

I have heard even young people express concern that the new communication technologies that appear to bring people together actually isolate them into smaller personal worlds. As people walk the streets with i-pods and phones, as they text and check their emails, as they are managed by their blackberries, when do they have the time to think for themselves or interact with the space and people around them? In their smaller worlds, they are deprived of the broadening influence of contact with diverse experiences and it seems that in that isolation, the level of respect for those outside the smaller world diminishes.

I could be wrong in my concern. I could just be expressing the usual criticism of the new by those who find their familiar world changing. It could be that all this technologically enhanced talking could turn into a new burst of interconnection among all of humankind. That would be nice. But humankind is so quick to run with anything that makes life easier and more enjoyable that we seldom stop to worry about the long-term effects of innovation. Television was supposed to have an educational influence yet through the years besides lowering behavioral standards it has created a culture of uncritical zombies.

Sometimes we should say no, not always to the innovation itself, but to the way we use it. The invention of the wheel led to the automobile, which like the original wheel is very useful but beside the negative effect on the environment the automobile has radically changed how we live. Everything from our sexual and eating habits to our relationships to our neighbors and children has been disrupted by the car culture. And only now are we saying no, attempting to respond to the negative affects of the car by restricting its use and offering options.

Of course, texting does not mean the end of civilization. But a laissez faire attitude toward innovation, as with a similar attitude toward the supposed free-market system, is an act of

resignation, an acceptance that we have little control over the urges of humankind, acknowledging that the march of progress cannot be controlled. That attitude of acceptance might make sense for people with a traditional religious approach that imagines that all of life is somehow in the hands of God, all part of his plan that will work out in the end. But as humanists we know there is no plan, just human beings playing around without a script. We can make bad decisions that are never redeemed, never work out. Our world can change forever.

Making our world better is not a process of material progress but progress in the way we treat each other, in the support the culture that we create offers each person in expressing their unique selves. And innovations in communication should be judged not by the quantity but by the quality of the exchange of thoughts and feelings. Improvements that help us to understand each other as an outlet for our empathy would be actual progress. <>