Chapter 33
Let's Talk Boundaries: How to Use Digital Technology Without it Using You

By Robin Phillips and Joshua Pauling

There is no doubt that digital technology—despite its dehumanizing tendencies explored in this book—can contribute to human flourishing. Just this week, I (Robin) have used my phone to find and save new poems to memorize. I have used Spotify to discover new composers and their works. By downloading "The Great Courses" onto my phone, I can be regularly instructed by some of the top professors in the world. When I'm learning a piece on the piano, I enjoy pulling up YouTube and hearing how various pianists have interpreted the work differently. I use Facebook to discuss issues with other intellectuals, and I use Telegram to keep in touch with my friend Jason in Siberia. When I'm driving, I use Google Maps constantly to avoid getting lost. When I hike, I use an exercise app to track my distance and plot my course on a map. I am constantly downloading audio novels to play during road trips or when I have trouble sleeping. I teach digital retrieval and evaluation skills, helping students leverage the internet for research. I even have a YouTube channel with tutorial videos about digital information literacy. I use social media to market my books and to share pictures with family members so we don't feel so far apart. And my thought life would be poorer without podcasts like "The Symbolic World" and "Lord of the Spirits"?

I (Joshua) utilize digital technologies to assist with many tasks in life as well. Researching this book was aided by online access to library collections around the world and journal databases. And putting together this manuscript was aided by the ability to create a shared Microsoft Word document for Robin and me to share. I have broadened my knowledge through many podcasts and YouTube videos. I check bank statements and prepare tax documents using digital interfaces. For my woodworking business I also leverage online tools. The list could go on. Clearly there are some tasks for which the internet and digital devices are appropriate and effective tools, where it makes little sense to try to do things in analog.

Ironically, there is a sense in which technology even enables us to push back against many of the dehumanizing trends in the modern world, as traditionally-minded people share tips about ways to beat the system – everything from how to live off the grid to how to grow your own food sustainably. My wife has often pointed out the irony of me (Joshua) publishing articles about the downsides of the internet *on the internet*. And we haven't even touched on the larger cultural benefits of digital technology in realms like medicine (although even these aren't unmitigated goods—read Illich's *Medical Nemesis*!)

We may be starting to sound like techno-utopians, but here's the rub. Digital technology *can* enhance human flourishing, but rarely actually does. Unlike the fantastic claims of techno-determinists, technology does not carry an intrinsic impetus toward progress. It's up to us to leverage digital technologies for good. And let's face it, most of the time we don't. There's a simple explanation for why we find it so hard to use our digital technology for good. As reality-mediating devices, these gadgets have a certain ethic baked into them. As we have argued throughout this book, our digital interfaces orient us toward a certain posture of being in the world that is ultimately dehumanizing. We can and should use these devices for good, but we must realize that this involves swimming against the stream. Just as one can use a race car to drive slowly, and just as one can use scissors to sip soup, it takes deliberate effort to use tools

differently from how they naturally operate. In the case of digital interfaces, resisting the dehumanizing nudge requires boundaries and deliberate force of will. And even if you are successful at mastering your devices, you should recognize that they will always have more potential to be foe than friend. Digital interfaces are not like Tolkien's ring of power that can never be used for good, but to master them requires enormous effort and constant vigilance. If eternal vigilance is the price of political liberty, it is also the price of digital freedom; let down your guard, and before you know it, your smartphone will have turned you into a cyborg.

I (Robin) realized the need for vigilance in my own life after getting a tablet in 2014. This was my first experience with a handheld smart-device. I was so proud of my tablet, which was an upgrade from my flip phone. I even had a custom-made green case for the tablet so it could dangle at my side. At first, I just used the tablet for audiobooks, but it didn't take long before it began to invade my life with continual distractions. The device was constantly connected, enabling me to check my email on hikes or look up the answer to any question that popped into my head. Even when I wasn't using the device, I was still thinking about everything happening in the digital ecosystem. I was quickly on my way to becoming a cyborg. A year after getting the device, I was experiencing prolonged periods of mental burnout that I described elsewhere, including exhaustion so debilitating that it impacted my mental health.[1] In a very short space of time, my attention had been captured and scattered. This led me to begin researching and experimenting with many of the boundaries we will be sharing in this chapter.

Boundaries are among the most neglected subjects in the technological literature. There are some notable exceptions with authors like Andy Crouch,[2] Cal Newport,[3] and Jean-Claude Larchet,[4] to name a few. But one of the things that has frustrated both of us is that the resources encouraging critical thinking about digital technologies rarely offer real practical advice. While this represents an enormous lacuna in the literature, the reason for it is not surprising: techno-utopians tend to take a defensive posture that eschews discussion of boundaries, while techno-rejectionists are the last people interested in using boundaries to leverage digital technology for good. Indeed, the techno-rejectionist tends to be as uninterested in talking about boundaries as a vegetarian is interested in participating in a seminar on responsible meat purchasing and preservation. Yet we would argue that the need—even the *missional* need—for discussion of boundaries cannot be denied. As Andy Crouch notes, **"**families have few more pressing needs than for guidance about how to handle the devices that have colonized our homes and our attention."[5] As we were writing this book, both of us were approached by various friends, many of them parents, asking us to offer advice on healthy technology use and limits. Thus, the discussion that follows will be primarily aimed at parents, though the principles are applicable to everyone.

The subject of boundaries is fraught with landmines on every side. We acknowledge that a chapter on practical suggestions will undoubtedly open us up to criticism, because what works for one family or individual may not work for another. We also acknowledge that sometimes boundaries can backfire, leading to results opposite from those intended. So we want to be clear from the outset that there is no one-size-fits-all, since every family culture has different dynamics that must be wisely taken into account. All these caveats notwithstanding, we are willing to broach this subject because it is so crucial. Doing something is better than doing nothing. And we all know, something needs to be done.

Some believe that the solution is total abstinence, and that our discussion of boundaries only perpetuates a type of *falsa pax* with the reigning technological order. It may be true that, as Jean-Claude Larchet observed in *The New Media Epidemic*, "total abstinence is without doubt

the best." But realism about our situation is required. Larchet also observes that to achieve the goal of total abstinence "requires struggle to bring about another kind of society, another world." As things currently stand, "the new media have sprung up like weeds in the soil of a civilization that has become worldwide."[6] Larchet argues that the solution is self-limitation and boundaries.

> Given the dynamics of its present development, the possibility of a fundamental change of direction is far off. Our world is so organized that it is extremely hard to abstain entirely from the new media. Realistically, we must compromise. We can limit our use of the new media to what is essential for our way of life, especially for our work. This may seem a rather modest goal, but if more and more people were to act in this way, the desired decline of these media would at least begin.[7]

As many of the boundaries we will be sharing focus on the preservation of attention, we begin by an apologetic for attention, and a discussion of why we should be concerned with protecting attentiveness.

What is Attention?

Attention is probably the most important of the intellectual virtues.[8] But attention is not something we are born with. When a baby enters the world, everything catches her eye. A baby doesn't know how to discriminate what is important from what is not, and everything from a pattern on the ceiling to her brother walking across the room commands her focus. This is called "alerting" and enables the child to respond to incoming stimuli.

Gradually, through interaction with the environment—and especially people—the baby starts recognizing that some things are worth looking at more than other things. Interesting objects, and especially her mother's gaze, command attention. She also learns to follow the gaze of her mother or father: Dad looks towards the wall, baby imitates and sees what's over there. Through sharing her parents' focus, the baby learns to participate in acts of joint attention with others. This type of attention-sharing is a common way primates learn what is important in the world. We see this in how a baby monkey rides piggyback on her mother, and thus learns to see the world through its mother's eyes.[9] Attention-sharing is also how we connect with other members of our species, developing the cognitive abilities that will later form into empathy, understanding, and love. (This capacity for joint attention-sharing is greatly reduced in autistic babies.)

Through this type of attention training, the baby moves from mere alerting to the use of the brain's "orienting networks." These networks are the gateway to the mind and, in the words of Maggie Jackson, "[help] us select information from among the millions of sensations we receive from the world, voluntarily or in reaction to our surroundings."[10] Jackson compares the orienting networks to a symphony conductor telling one part of the orchestra to stand out and another to play in the background. The brain's ability to reach toward one thing and not another is the basis for the very word attention, made up of the Latin *ad* and *tendere* meaning to "stretch toward."

Being able to orient toward one thing and not another—initially at our parents' prompting, and later independently—is largely in place by kindergarten. But that is not enough for a healthy attention. After all, mentally ill people are very good at orienting, they just pay attention to the wrong things, leading to obsessive and neurotic behaviors. That's where the

executive network, powered by the anterior cingulate, comes into play. Through this network, the child learns that some things are worth orienting toward more than other things. She learns that the pattern on the wall, though interesting, is not as important as the dog barking in the corner of the room. Through love, nutrition, education, and habits that facilitate rightly ordered affection, the child's alerting and orienting systems come under control of what has traditionally been called reason and what neuroscientists call the executive functions.

Unlike alerting and orienting, the executive networks continue to be honed through practice, experience and the long, patient cultivation of the mind. As our executive functions become highly honed, we come to participate in more sophisticated forms of attention sharing, through a meeting of the minds with others in person or through books and art. But this, too, can be compromised. Just as autistic children find it difficult to orient in acts of shared attention with parents, the executive functions can also be compromised through various factors, including mental illnesses (particularly cluster B personality disorders), trauma, alcoholism, poor education, and habits of mental laziness practiced repeatedly over time.

Attention is what happens when all three of the aforementioned systems—alerting, orienting, and executive functions—are working in healthy tandem. A flourishing attention, in turn, leads to wellbeing, since the same systems that regulate attention in our sensory perception also enable us to regulate thoughts—for example, censoring unhealthy cognitions, and developing impulse control. As Maggie Jackson observes, "People who focus well report feeling less fear, frustration, and sadness day to day, partly because they can literally deploy their attention away from negatives in life." Children who score high on controlling their attention are more empathetic, better able to feel guilt for their wrongdoings, and less subject to aggressive behavior. Even "primates that receive training in attention become less aggressive."[11]

The dark side of the attention systems is that it's possible to retrain ourselves back to the infantile condition, where we have no orchestra conductor to mute background stimuli. Instead of going through life hearing music, we hear a constant cacophony of noise. And in case you haven't guessed where we're headed in this discussion, that is what our smart-devices do. As our brains become hijacked by stimuli, we start to resemble the newborn who doesn't know that her mother is more important than the pattern on the ceiling. This erosion of attention leads to everything from overstimulation to lack of impulse control. It can also lead to a profound loneliness, as we become unable to enjoy the meeting of minds that come from joint attention sharing, but instead begin relating to people only in slices and disconnected bits. The more we use these devices improperly, the more our executive functions atrophy, returning us to conditions of mental immaturity. Neurologically, we become like babies whose orienting networks are not under control of the executive functions, lost in a world of chaotic alerting.

Bottom line: we need boundaries to protect our attention.

Part 1: Exploding Four Myths About Digital Technology

Before offering a toolbox of techniques for regaining our attention and flourishing in the digital age, we need to debunk a few myths. One of the reasons so many people find it difficult to have healthy boundaries with digital devices is they often misunderstand what the real dangers of these devices actually are. By misdiagnosing the problem, they attempt solutions that do not really work and leave the underlying attentional problems unaddressed.

Myth #1: It's All About Screen Time

One of the easiest mistakes to make with digital boundaries is to focus primarily on the amount of time spent on our devices. This mistake is likely because discourse on digital interfaces has been unconsciously framed by discussions of TV in the 80's and 90's, which tended always to lapse back to alarming statistics about how much time Americans waste in front of the box. Thinking the problem with digital devices is primarily that of time, many parents implement boundaries that merely focus on the quantity of time their children spend in front of screens.

Now, to be sure, screen time is one issue to consider, as nothing can be good for us in large quantities, except perhaps prayer. Moreover, one of the first ways that digital addiction manifests itself is in a person spending inordinate amounts of time on a device, at the expense of engagement with other people, nature, and books. But we would argue that an even deeper problem with our digital devices is not quantitative but qualitative. Our phones and tablets do not simply waste our time; rather, these devices train our brains to approach all of life with what Linda Stone has called "continuous partial attention." Yes, we shouldn't use digital interfaces too much, but it's equally important that *when we do use our devices, we do not use them in a way that reinforces continuous partial attention*.

To understand what we mean by continuous partial attention, consider how offline activities that are meaningful to us—whether cooking a meal, conversing with friends, enjoying recreation, or participating in sports—are often endlessly punctuated by digital interruptions, from text messages to various types of notifications. Whether these digital interruptions require a response like a glance or a quick reply, or whether these interruptions merely clutter our brains with background noise, they siphon off mental resources from whatever activity we are engaged in. We may be paying attention, but only partially. The result of this divided attention is a double-edged sword, for not only are we unable to fully attend to the things that are meaningful for us in the offline world, but we are also unable to attend to activity on our phones with full attention, leading to hasty replies to text messages, impatient responses to digital conversations, inability to remember social media posts that might otherwise be impactful, etc.

Often this redirection of attention seems minor and trivial. Is there really anything so bad with quickly answering a text message during a movie or glancing at an incoming email while walking with a friend? In itself, no. But if these behaviors are repeated enough to become habitual, the aggregate impact will be to normalize the condition of continuous partial attention, thus eroding the power of our executive networks to control what we orient toward. After all, attention is like a muscle: you either use it or lose it. Thus, when continuous partial attention becomes ingrained, it starts being difficult to deeply focus on any one thing for a long period of time, and it becomes especially difficult to focus on something complex that requires higher cognitive functions. Lacking attentiveness, we go through life in a daze, never fully being present with anything. Over time this can lead to intolerance for complexity, inability to think sequentially, trouble deeply connecting with others, and difficulty making connections and forming schemas. Even worse, an undisciplined mind can make us susceptible to those who would colonize our attention for their own commercial or ideological ends.

Ironically, if continuous partial attention becomes the norm in our life, we become unskilled at leveraging even digital interfaces for their full potential. We probably don't think of activities like answering text messages, surfing the web, or watching a podcast on YouTube as activities requiring skill. Yet it is certainly possible to perform these tasks well or poorly. For

digital activity to be effective, meaningful, and successful, we need certain skills and virtues. A digital skill would be something like the following:

- knowing how to perform effective due diligence on an information claim;
- knowing when to reply to a text message with follow-up questions and how to effectively construct those questions;
- being able to set up an effective query in a web search and knowing how to fact-check the resulting answers;
- competence at recognizing if a podcaster is speaking from a place of expertise or just making things up;
- knowing how to scroll through an information stream to extract needed information without being drawn into extraneous or spiritually damaging stimuli;
- knowing how to use metacognition (awareness of one's own brain activity) to monitor if your brain is working efficiently or being colonized by digital forces outside your control. (An example of metacognition is recognizing something like, "I notice my brain is tired right now, so I might want to stay off platforms like YouTube that are hard to manage responsibly when tired," or "I can notice myself slipping into search habits to simply confirm my biases, rather than genuinely seeking out a range of perspectives.")

In addition to these skills, success online also requires character traits and intellectual virtues, including,

- even-handedness
- reflectiveness
- prudence
- carefulness
- moderation
- thoroughness
- critical thinking
- self-control
- focus

This last virtue, focus, is not simply one among a range of virtues needed for effective use of digital devices; it is a key to unlock the other virtues of the mind, as well as being necessary for developing skills. That is why, once our focus is eroded, not only will we be unable to properly engage with the offline world, but our online activity will suffer too.

In his book *Focus*, Daniel Goleman shared research suggesting that the ability to focus is an even greater indication of future life success than IQ.[12] At a minimum, focus is necessary for success within the digital ecosystem, let alone when you are unplugged. Yet ironically, it is often the people who consider themselves most pro-technology who engage with digital interfaces in a

way that trains them to be unfocused and therefore not as successful as they might otherwise be. Through split focus, our actual engagement with digital interfaces becomes a shadow of what we could experience with highly-honed attention.

Putting all this together, the discussion of digital interfaces needs to be reframed away from merely the issue of time. Screen time is important because everything should be in moderation. But it would be better for a teenager to spend two hours in front of a screen practicing skills and epistemic virtues than to spend thirty minutes without those skills and virtues. But like anything, these skills and virtues do not come naturally but require attentive training and attentive practice. Perhaps the best way we can practice good digital skills and virtues is not to multitask while on our digital interfaces.

Myth #2: Multitasking is a Skill You Develop Through Practice

You've probably heard people say things like, "I can use my phone while engaged in other activities because I'm a great multitasker," or even, "I'm the queen of multitasking."

If you think you're a great multitasker, think again. In 2009, researchers at Stanford found that those who multitask frequently and believed that it boosted their performance *were actually worse at multitasking than those who preferred not to multitask.*[13] Indeed, when measured by the same established cognitive control dimensions, the group who had a lifestyle of frequent multitasking performed worse than the group of light multitaskers. This is sobering: if you multitask a lot and think you're good at it, there is a statistical likelihood that you are actually a very bad multitasker.

The study, which has been reinforced by a string of more recent research, also found that multitasking makes a person "more susceptible to interference from irrelevant environmental stimuli and from irrelevant representations in memory."[14] If you think about it, this makes sense: when we multitask, rather than inhibiting extraneous stimuli and strengthening our capacity for single-minded focus on one thing, we do the opposite through continually shifting our attention from one thing to the next. Over time this does more than merely destroy attention; it also erodes impulse control. Impulse control depends on rejecting interference from irrelevant stimuli, whether arising internally from one's emotions, passions, and mental representations, or arising from an external source. Not surprisingly, another study found that multitasking shrinks the part of the brain involved in higher cognitive functions, *including emotional regulation*.[15] The implications should be obvious: if you want to resist the inner demons, start by resisting the digital ones.

While all this seems pretty predictable, the aforementioned Stanford study also uncovered something that seems bizarre. They found that the more you multitask, the worse you become at it. This is counter-intuitive because most of the time we grow more skilled at the things we practice, whether it's learning to play the violin or speak French. But multitasking seems to fall into the weird category of behaviors that go against this norm: *the more you practice it the worse you become.* Even those abilities that you might expect a multitasker to excel at—for example, being able to switch quickly from one thing to another while keeping things separate in the mind—are skills that heavy-multitaskers perform very poorly at. Through a test involving switching between images of letters and images of numbers, the researchers found that those who did not multitask frequently performed better at switching back and forth and keeping things separate in their minds. In other words, the less you multitask, the better you are at it.

If you doubt the scientists when they tell us that the more you multitask the worse you become at it, then try a little experiment. Find someone who multitasks frequently, perhaps someone who routinely uses his or her phone while engaged in other activities. When this multitasker is in the presence of his or her phone, try to have a deep conversation with the person, perhaps a conversation that involves following out an argument or principle across multiple contexts. I think the results will speak for themselves: heavy multitaskers are actually very bad at processing information. Again, the more you practice it, the worse you become.

The impact of multitasking does not just occur when we are actively switching between sites of focus. Earl Miller, professor of neuroscience at MIT, says that "switch cost" (the loss of attention when we're pulled away from a task, even if only for a split second to glance at a message) has an effect on the brain's ability to focus that lasts up to 15 or 20 minutes. The worst effects of switch cost occur in the first 64 seconds after checking one's email or text messages regardless of whether or not there was a message of significance. Trying to get back the lost thread after a distraction slows one down in ways that, over time, lead to significantly less productivity. Because of this, it's probable that the average office worker wastes at least 8.5 hours a week figuring out what he or she was doing moments before. This may be one of the reasons that researchers have also found that one's ability to see a cell phone hinders the brain's ability to focus.[16] If this is what happens to office workers, think of the effect switch cost has on family relationships, and even intimacy between husband and wife.

The detrimental impact of switch cost happens to people of all ages. One study looked at children ages one to three playing with toys while a gameshow was on in the background. When the TV was on, the children "begin to look like junior multitaskers, moving from toy to toy, forgetting what they were doing when they were interrupted by an interesting snippet of the show."[17]

If multitasking is so damaging, then why do we do it? There are many reasons, but one is that we like being stimulated, and dislike tasks that feel boring. "Our smart phones are an insurance policy against ever being bored," observed David Livermore, a world-renowned expert in cultural intelligence. He continued:

> And granted, not everyone across the world has a smart phone. I still catch glimpses of elderly people in certain communities who are simply sitting outside doing 'nothing.' But the reality is, most of us reach for our phones whenever there's a minute to spare.[18]

Livermore goes on to cite research from Sandi Mann and Rebekah Cadman who set up a study asking people to come up with creative ideas for how to use a pair of plastic cups.[19] The participants were formed into two groups. "Prior to the brainstorming session, one group of participants was asked to copy numbers from a phone book while a control group was not given the boring task. The group who slogged through the phone book assignment came up with more creative ways to use the plastic cups than the others."[20]

It isn't just that boredom helps with creativity. In order for any of the higher cognitive functions to work at optimal capacity, the brain needs lots of time during the day when we are at rest, when we are quiet, and when we can focus on specific mental, imaginative or interpersonal tasks against a backdrop of stillness. We especially need quiet to develop rich inner lives. Again from David Livermore:

> Without boredom, we're less likely to think about our inner lives… Allowing for boredom increases the capacity for empathy and perspective taking. Perspective taking is the capability to step outside ourselves and imagine the emotions, perceptions, and motivations of another.[21]

I don't actually like the term boredom, with its connotations of listlessness, sloth, and acedia. I prefer the classical Christian concept of leisure, as discussed in our chapter on "Digital Amusements." So the next time you find a lull of activity, whether you're in line at the supermarket or waiting in a traffic jam, take a deep breath and lean into leisure. And the next time you're tempted to reach for your phone as an insurance policy against boredom, remind yourself that being still is good for your brain, and *the more you multitask, the worse you become at it.*

Myth #3: Split Focus Enables Me to Process Lots of Information

Many compulsive multitaskers defend split attention by pointing out that they process lots of information. This too is a myth, based on thinking of the brain like a computer that is constantly receiving inputs and then "saving" them.

Throughout this book we have argued that parallelism between the computer and the human brain is problematic. But in this particular case, the computer analogy works well up to a point. After all, our brains have something called "working memory," which is analogous to a computer's RAM. In a computer, RAM (Random Access Memory) is where the machine stores whatever data is currently being used or processed by the operating system. But "storing" does not mean "saving": data in the RAM, while facilitating quick access to that information, remains volatile, meaning it will be erased when the computer is powered off unless first saved. Similarly, our own "working memory" is a part of the brain that holds and manipulates information needed for current cognitive tasks. This is the network that is filled with the content of our immediate consciousness – whatever we happen to be thinking about or observing at the time. There is debate about how many things the working memory can attend to at any one point (researchers used to think around seven, but now that number has been reduced), but all agree that the storage capacity of our working memory is limited. By contrast, the brain's long-term memory can house an almost unlimited amount of content.

The key is to save information from the working memory into the long-term memory. Just as a computer needs to save the material in the RAM into the hard drive, so the human brain needs to save whatever is in the working memory into the long-term memory. This is where the analogy with the computer breaks down. We can't just save and automatically transfer information into our long-term memory. Crucially, the conversion of material from the working memory into the long-term memory is not automatic. Remember that the working memory is small: it can only focus on a limited amount of information at any one time. Nicholas Carr compares the working memory to a thimble, and the long-term memory to a bathtub. When information is mediated to us slowly, the thimble can be filled up through a steady drip and then transferred into the bathtub. But if our working memory is overloaded—as it can be with too many distractions, or with rapid thinking, multitasking, divided attention, and over-stimulation—then the thimble is too overwhelmed, and only a small portion of the working memory can be converted into the long-term memory. This means that people with continual split focus may be a

receptacle for lots of information, but they are not actually processing or remembering it.[22] As St. Isaac the Syrian warned in the seventh century, "A distracted heart cannot avoid forgetfulness, and wisdom does not open her door before it."[23]

Okay, but why should this matter, one might ask. Given that most of what a multitasker absorbs is probably not worth remembering, is it perhaps a good thing that much of this will not be processed but quickly forgotten? No, and to understand why, we need to know something else about the long-term memory.

The long-term memory is not just a collection of random facts, images, and thoughts. Rather, the long-term memory stores information within structures that are called schemas. These schemas enable our long-term memory to become interconnected into larger architectures of meaning. Matthew Guyan called these schemas "organizational frameworks of storage (like filing cabinets)."[24] These organizational structures in the brain do not simply enable knowledge to be retained for later retrieval; they also allow knowledge to be converted into intelligence and understanding. Schemas enable individuals to make connections, to perceive patterns and narratives, to internalize what we learn, instead of having everything mixed together as disconnected particulars. Ultimately, schemas are important for the acquisition of wisdom. As Nicholas Carr succinctly put it, "The depth of our intelligence hinges on our ability to transfer information from working memory to long-term memory and weave it into conceptual schemas."[25]

This means that with too much cognitive load, our brains become lost in a sea of particulars without the ability to connect these particulars into larger structures of understanding. We become receptacles of information, but never really give our brains the opportunity to form schemas and thus to internalize what we learn. In short, we condemn ourselves to perpetual shallowness, thinking we know a lot merely because we enjoy access to lots of information. As professional audiobook narrator Jonah Martin notes, "we have confused access to information with *understanding and personal transformation*."[26] In order for schemas to sediment themselves into our personality and facilitate growth, we need times of quiet. We need to provide our brain with times of rest, stillness, and undistracted sleep so that the experiences and knowledge that pass through our working memory can solidify and deepen conceptual schemas, and thus help us grow into deeper and richer individuals. But this will not happen automatically if we have left the working memory in a condition of overload—in other words, if we allow our focus to be continually split and overstimulated.

Bottom line: split focus hinders you from ever really processing information that may be meaningful. Split focus hinders your ability to think deeply about what you encounter and to internalize what you learn and experience.

Myth #4: The News is Important

Many of us are enticed, entertained, or even addicted by digitally-mediated news. This serves the interest of device manufacturers, media outlets, and political interests, all who have incentives to keep us in a perpetual state of emergency, outrage and fear. Those who are cynical about the mainstream media are not immune to this but will often consume alternative news that has a similar effect. In the end, many Christians spend more time listening to news videos, podcasts, or commentary than they spend praying, reading spiritual books, or talking to family members.

It is important to ask how these consumption patterns form and habituate us. The content of the news is more than merely distracting, for it actually malforms us in a type of reverse catechesis. This would seem obvious if we were actually seeking out in-person conflicts, crowds, tumults, or peeking into the private lives of the rich, famous and powerful. Yet when we do this on the screen, it somehow feels more innocent. But what catechesis are we receiving from this endless stream of content? How can priests and local parishes compete with such a barrage of content, let alone counteract the alternative media worlds in which their parishioners live?

Although this may seem like a uniquely contemporary dilemma, the fundamental problem is ancient. In the seventh century, St. Isaac the Syrian warned his disciples not to be distracted by triviality, writing, "Do not forget Him, your mind being distracted with futile concerns."[27]

It's easy to justify news consumption on the grounds that the news is not actually futile and trivial, but important. Isn't it necessary to be informed and to know what's going on? Well, we have some news of our own: the news is rarely important and actually obscures the things that matter most.

Ask yourself this challenging question: what is actually more important for *you*, what is taking place in Washington D.C. and the Middle East, or your own neighborhood and community? I (Robin) spent a lot of time following the news last year, but now I can only remember one thing I read because it so quickly became passe. Yet I can remember vividly my interactions with people in my community. (As for the one thing in last year's news that I do remember, it was one of those rare news items that did actually impact my family: flooding in the part of California where my son lives. I think that proves the point: what is important is what impacts me and my loved ones.) Now whenever I'm tempted to spend more than a minute a day in the news, I stop and ask myself, "Is this going to be important to me two years from now? Will I even remember this two months from now?"

Here again we can learn from the ancients. In novels that take place in pre-industrial times, it is interesting to see how war is treated. Often the characters talk about never having seen a war, or perhaps hearing there is a war in the north and then wondering if it will come this far south. The reason war is discussed as something remote is because the real center of gravity is what is happening in one's own village. Sure, there may be war that is getting closer, but until it actually arrives, this is not as noteworthy as the fact that there are new baby goats on your neighbor's farm, or that the harvest is coming earlier this year.

To us moderns, this type of mentality seems quaint and old-fashioned. But from the perspective of anthropology and neurology, it is more natural for human brains. We were designed to process information in our immediate surroundings, specifically communities of around 150 people or less.[28] The further this radius is extended, the greater becomes the human propensity for misjudgment, and thus the need for highly honed epistemic virtues. Thus, a person who is required to think about the bigger picture (for example, a king) must have a special set of virtues; and consequently the Hebrew Wisdom Literature gives considerable attention to the epistemic virtues necessary for the wise ruler.[29]

Our society has all sorts of technologies that make remote happenings seem especially pressing, vibrant, and relevant—in fact, more important than what is happening in our own community. We consume this information yet without the epistemic virtue of the wise king. The fact that there has been an earthquake in Turkey feels more relevant than the fact that my neighbor has no way to get to work because his car has broken down. As a result, we are apt to misinterpret the danger that remote happenings actually pose to us while insufficiently

appreciating the importance (for us) of our responsibilities to the people God has placed in our local lives.

Moreover, a constant stream of news creates a temptation toward over-speaking and gossip. Because digitally-mediated content is packaged in such a way that activates the dorsolateral prefrontal cortex and thus calls for a reaction (see section "From Receiving to Using" in chapter 32), news consumption is inseparable from the burden of feeling like we need to react. Yet given that the speed of information consumption is faster than our ability to process and perform due diligence, we typically end up reacting in foolish ways. Perhaps the most typical foolish response to the news is to follow the fool in Proverbs, who is described as one who gossips through passing on information he has not carefully studied.[30]

What if we ignored all the digital noise and just focused on what is happening in our own community? We suggest our lives would be much quieter, richer and humane. To quote again from St. Isaac the Syrian,

> "A humble man is never pleased to see gatherings, confused crowds, tumult, shouts and cries, opulence, adornment and luxury, the cause of insobriety; nor does he take pleasure in conversations, assemblies, noise, and the scattering of the senses; but above all he chooses to be by himself and to collect himself within himself, being alone in stillness… He is not engaged in manifold and fluctuating affairs, but at all times he desires to be unoccupied and free of the cares and the confusions of the things of this world, that he may keep his thoughts from going outside himself."[31]

Myth 5: My Technologically-addicted Son or Daughter Will Grow Out of It

Parents may overlook a childhood bad habit, knowing that in time their children will grow out of it. That can be appropriate. But technological overuse is different, since it permanently alters the brain, especially of teenagers.

Using clinical research gathered through rigorous studies and experiments, including some of their own, Gary Small and Gigi Vorgan were able to pinpoint exactly what happens to the brain when we become addicted to our communication technologies, especially gaming. And it is now clear that overuse of digital technology causes atrophy in the parts of the brain needed for intuition, interpersonal skills, empathy, and emotional intelligence.[32] The most devastating research comes in studies showing that, once lost, many teenagers can never get these brain regions back, as the adult brain solidifies the neurological habits of adolescents, resulting in perpetual immaturity.

Before we can properly appreciate this research, we need to understand something about the teenage brain. During adolescence, the teenage brain goes through many changes, including changes that temporarily make it difficult to understand other people's emotions.

> Dr. Robert McGivern and co-workers at San Diego State University have found that when kids enter adolescence, they struggle with the ability to recognize another person's emotions. During the study, the teenage volunteers viewed faces demonstrating different emotional states. Compared with other age groups, eleven and twelve-year-olds (the age when puberty typically kicks in) needed to take more time to identify the specific

> emotions expressed by the faces presented to them. It took longer for their frontal lobes to identify happy, angry, or sad faces, because of the pruning or trimming down of excess synaptic connections that occurs during puberty. However, once that pruning-down process is complete and the teenager matures to adulthood, expression recognition becomes faster and more efficient.[33]

This pruning down process in the adolescent brain explains why teenagers struggle with selfishness: they find it difficult to identify with other people's feelings, and thus to exercise empathy, mature emotional intelligence, and impulse control. Small and Vorgan explain that this "may explain why teens are less able to appreciate how their decisions affect those around them."[34] But that pruning down process is temporary, and eventually the brain solidifies and frontal lobe function returns to full capacity. At least, that's how it's supposed to work. But Small and Vorgan are concerned that overuse of technology can permanentize the immature brain of the teenager; digital devices may lock their brain in a pattern of immaturity that they never recover from.

> Unfortunately, today's obsession with computer technology and video gaming appears to be stunting frontal lobe development in many teenagers, impairing their social and reasoning abilities. If young people continue to mature in this fashion, their brain's neural pathways may never catch up. It is possible that they could remain locked into a neural circuitry that stays at an immature and self-absorbed emotional level, right through adulthood…. Are we rearing a new generation with underdeveloped frontal lobes–a group of young people unable to learn, remember, feel, or control their impulses?[35]

This should be sobering for parents. As much as we like to say, "My technologically-addicted son or daughter will grow out of it," it's possible that they won't, and that their frontal lobe function will be forever impaired. How to prevent that? Boundaries.

Part 2: Developing Your Toolkit of Boundaries

Tip #1: Use Time to Compartmentalize…and How Robin Stopped Being a Cyborg

The smartphone has created a situation where everything bleeds into everything else. For example, work life intrudes into family life, even into the evening; whether one is an office executive or a pastor or a teacher or something else, there is the sense that work is constant. Gone are the days when you left your work at the university, church office, factory, or store. This creates a completely novel situation in the history of our species. The cycles of day and night, and the limitations of geographical space, used to create natural boundaries that enabled work to be compartmentalized from the rest of life, thus protecting us from a condition of total work. It is still possible to compartmentalize, but now we have to be deliberate about it.

I (Robin) use a method where I have periods of each day where my phone and computer are connected online, and other times of the day when these devices are off or on airplane mode. As of writing this book, I work remotely as an editor, writer, and researcher for various clients

and publishers. This job gives me the freedom to create my own schedule. I have chosen to use the mornings as my offline period. This is the time I devote to chores (cleaning, cooking, errands, etc.), reading (including reading things I've printed during my online period), listening to podcasts or audiobooks I've downloaded, as well as leisure in the classical sense: activities like music, letter writing, mindfulness, playing the piano, memorizing poetry, going for walks, and, of course, spiritual devotions.

On the other hand, my online periods are typically in the afternoon and evening when I work and take care of jobs requiring the internet. During this period, I find it hard to read with a contemplative mindset; thus, if during the course of my work I come across something that I want to digest slowly (whether an email requiring extra attention, a thoughtful article, or a particularly engaging Facebook post), I will print these for perusal in my next offline period.

A few practical details may be useful for the sake of others wanting to try this method or a variation of it.

- I find it helpful to practice intermittent fasting by not eating anything during my offline periods, which further enables me to slow down for better facilitating deeper engagement with whatever contemplative activities I am pursuing.

- When I first wake up in the morning, I tend to be groggy and slow. Rather than trying to immediately energize myself with the dopamine rush that comes from turning on my phone or drinking caffeine, I will stay in bed for a while, leveraging the grogginess to slowly read non-fiction (including thoughtful articles printed during my online period). Perhaps the main mistake we make when reading non-fiction is to go too fast. Once the day gets going, I find it difficult to read slowly and find myself slipping into a grab-and-go approach, whereas the natural grogginess in the morning creates the perfect conditions for reading with a slow and leisured posture. Occasionally I'll even drift back to sleep and dream about what I was just reading. This has been a very rewarding way for me to engage with thoughtful non-fiction. Eventually I'll get up and do my morning devotions, preferably outside where I can get exposure to direct sunlight.

- Since I want to be available for phone calls from family members and friends, during my offline periods I will have my phone on to receive calls, but with all notifications and messages turned off, and the option to check for messages not accessible from my home screen. Friends and family know that if there is an emergency, they can phone me instead of texting. If I had a problem receiving too many calls, such as excessive work calls, then during my offline period I could program my phone to only ring when family members or close friends call.

- If during my offline period I think of something I'd like to do online, whether posting a picture on Instagram, executing an information query, or replying to a message, I write it down in a list of things to do when online. The simple act of writing something down frees the frontal cortex not to feel like it needs to hold on or remember it. But more than that, the delay between impulse and execution sometimes gives better perspective. For example, during my offline period in the morning I may have thought of four things I'd like to look up together with a couple argumentative messages to send to a co-worker. When my online period arrives a few hours later, I may realize that, realistically, only one of the information queries is important, and I don't need to send any argumentative messages at all. The fact that my

online period is also the time set aside for my work helps incentivize me not to waste time on trivial activities.

- This system enables me to make the most of my online period, because I'm able to leverage the benefits of the internet without the type of information fatigue that comes from being plugged in 24/7. But I am also able to make the most of my offline period because I am not subject to electronic distractions during my times of prayer, reading, art, household chores, etc.

- During my online period of the day, I still need to protect my attention. For example, if I am writing an email, I don't want to be distracted by text messages; if I am replying to a text message, I don't want to be distracted by someone commenting on one of my articles on Facebook; if I am discussing something with a friend on Telegram, I don't want to be distracted by emails or news alerts. To eliminate such distractions, I turn everything off that I am not actively working on. This is especially important for things that beep. For me, simply knowing that at any moment my phone might make the sound of an incoming text keeps me on the edge, like a person undergoing Chinese water torture. Sometimes I have to spend considerable time figuring out how to turn things off, because the tech companies don't make it easy (indeed, their business model feeds on keeping us in a state of continuous partial attention).

Although I started this method in response to negative threats against my attention, I continue it because of the positive joy of rediscovering myself through peace and quiet. Even household chores and errands, usually a burden, have been transformed into times of quiet and prayer when done in my offline period. I couldn't agree more with Jean-Claude Larchet that "by switching off the phone to provide long periods of silence, and by reserving times of solitude, modern man can rediscover himself. He can recover his inner life and re-forge himself in outer silence and inner peace. He can find once more the virtues of meditation, contemplation and prayer, and the riches of spiritual life, which his dispersion among worldly cares has denied him."[36]

"This method is all very well for Robin," someone might object, "because he works from home, his children are grown, and he has a job that enables him to create his own schedule." True. But I encourage you to ask yourself the following question. In any 24-hour cycle, how much time do you need for sleep and how much time do you need for being plugged in? Write both these numbers down. (I realize that many people need to be plugged in for an entire eight-hour work day or longer. That's fine; write the number down whatever it is.) Now subtract these two numbers from 24, and that is how much time you have left for peace and quiet. You may be surprised to find how much time you waste through continuous partial attention.

If you are a parent trying to create boundaries for your children, you can adopt a similar system. If, for whatever reason, you have chosen to let your children use digital interfaces, then consider having times of the day when your kids know they can use these devices, and other times of the day when the children know they cannot. That might be once a day from 3:00 to 4:00 pm, or it might be every weekend for six hours, or it might be each day when their homework and chores are finished. The main thing is to be consistent.

Given what we saw earlier about the quality of screen time being more important than the amount, use your children's online periods as an opportunity to help them develop good skills and virtues. One way you can do that is by turning off everything else on the phone or computer

they are not actually using. Remember, attention is just as important when you are online as when you are offline, lest the habits of scattered focus and distraction forged by digital interfaces spill into one's offline habits.

If this type of compartmentalization seems too complicated, you might find it easier to go the route of electronic minimalism, avoiding digital interfaces completely. If your kids need a phone when they're at school or for emergency purposes, consider getting them a flip phone, a minimalist "light phone," or a smart phone connected to a parental control system that enables parents to turn off everything that isn't essential.[37] Although it may seem hard to do without digital gadgetry, you may find it actually makes life much easier.

Tip #2: Use Space to Compartmentalize

Compartmentalizing isn't just about time, but also place. Many people find it helpful to have one room set aside for online work, and another place for leisure (prayer, reading, music etc.) The simple act of partitioning the digital room in a separate space helps it not invade the rest of life.

I have one friend who keeps his phone in the trunk of his car. Another friend has a room for reading separate from the one he uses for electronics. And countless parents have drawn a line when it comes to technology in the bedroom. These are all excellent ways to strategically use space to compartmentalize technology and prevent it from becoming omnipresent.

One friend of ours, Annie Crawford, told us that she and her husband, Thomas, kept all their children's electronics in one room that was public. They allowed no video games until age 10, and then only Wii sports with dad in the living room. As they gradually added more entertainment, they made sure they were group games that they could play as a family in the evening, similar to how they also play boardgames.

Annie and Thomas also allowed TV to be enjoyed in a communal space where it was a shared activity, and where Annie could keep an eye on it while cooking, etc. The only TV consumed was extended narrative movies, which forms the imagination better than the episodic and chaotic nature of cartoons.

Now that Annie and Thomas's children are young adults, all three of them thank their parents for these boundaries, for limiting screens and sending them outside to play instead.

Tip #3: Create Barriers to Entry

Another helpful tip is to create what Albert Borgmann calls thresholds, as mentioned in the chapter, "Three Prophets from the Dawn of the Digital Age." By thresholds, Borgmann means barriers to entry. In other words, we should make it more difficult to access and engage with digital amusements and listless entertainment; and—perhaps more importantly—we should also make it easier to access and engage with deeper activities and richer relationships. Something that I (Joshua) have done is to not have a normal internet service provider in our home. If we want to access the internet on our computer, we have to turn on our computer, create an internet hotspot with our phone, and then have our computer connect to that hotspot. In other words, the default setting of the computer is that it is off, and that it is not connected to the internet. While only small barriers, even these additional micro-steps required to access the

internet on our computer prevents us from some listless distractions, and encourages a more purposeful use dedicated to specific tasks. Andy Crouch notes similarly, "the discipline here is committing to this simple rule: the screen stays off and blank unless we are using it…for a specific creative purpose."[38]

There are many other ways to create similar thresholds. It might be removing social media apps from your phone's home-screen and burying them somewhere deeper on your phone. It might be having to manually type in your username and password to access social media. It might be keeping digital devices in a certain location in your home that has a related threshold. Some families have even found it useful to lock their phones in "kitchen safe" devices popularized in the Netflix documentary *The Social Dilemma.* These cookie jar-style boxes enable the user to lock his or her phone in it for specified amounts of time, making it inaccessible until the timer unlocks the box.

Conversely, just as barriers to entry can be raised to access the internet or digital devices, barriers can be lowered to cultivate other habits and activities ordered towards higher goods and virtue formation. Instead of having devices out and easily accessible, what if books and board games were out instead? Instead of having devices out and easily accessible, what if books and board games were out instead? Instead of the TV or computer always standing at the ready, on and internet-connected, what if a guitar and piano were standing at the ready? There are many ways to experiment with this, but Borgmann's principle is simple: what is ready at hand will be our default activity, and so we might as well make the default point us in the right direction. Andy Crouch adds some further practical suggestions:

> Find the one room where your family spends the most time and ruthlessly eliminate the things that ask little of you and develop little in you. Move the TV to a less central location—and ideally a less comfortable one. And begin filling the space that is left over with opportunities for creativity and skill, beauty and risk….This simple nudge, all by itself, is a powerful antidote to consumer culture, the way of life that finds satisfaction mostly in enjoying what other people have made. It's an invitation instead to creating culture—finding joy in shaping something useful or beautiful out of the raw material of the world.[39]

Part 3: Six Common Mistakes Parents Make

Mistake #1: Expect Children to Swim Before They Can Walk

Given that digital interfaces nudge us toward dehumanizing modes of acting, thinking, and being in the world, using them well takes practice and constant vigilance. Yet, as we have seen, often our "practice" on these devices merely reinforces bad habits. If most of your time on a digital device is spent practicing wrong habits (split attention, jumping around from app to app, chasing whatever promises to give the next dopamine rush), then it becomes progressively harder to develop the skills and virtues necessary for leveraging technology in a healthy way.

One common mistake that parents make is to let their children move on to more powerful weapons before they have mastered the skills and virtues of the lesser tools. For example, if your

fourteen-year-old hasn't developed good digital habits when it comes to text messaging (for example, if he checks for messages while focused on something else, or replies to messages hastily without proper reflection, or texts in a way that participates in the degradation of the English language), then bringing video games or social media into the mix is like expecting someone to swim before he can walk. Or again, many teenagers are let loose into podcast land before they have even learned how to perform due diligence on the veracity of a simple news article.

There is a larger spiritual point here. If we can't even say no to scrolling just a few more minutes on Facebook or watching one more video on YouTube, how can we be confident we will be able to say no when real temptation comes or the powers of this world demand that we deny the Christ?

Bottom line: help your kids master the easier tasks before you release them into the more difficult ones.

Mistake #2: Focus on the Negative

Another common mistake is to create a sense of heaviness about screens, offering restrictions in a context of fussiness and negativity. Without a healthy family culture, boundaries will not only be off-putting, but will set your children up for an overreaction in the next generation.

The best way not to let your family be invaded by screens is to create a positive family culture focused around the joys of full presence with each other. This could involve family reading, rich conversations, cooking meals together, playing board games, making music, exercising together, camping, or playing outside. Lasting good habits can only emerge out of a positive vision, one that is more fulfilling than digital distractions. The solitary "no" from mom and dad will not withstand the digital allure in the long run. There must be a better "yes" to help refine and properly order our desires so that digital junk food pales in comparison to the main course of real-life activities and relationships.

Just as a healthy family culture acts as a buffer against the dehumanizing impact of screens, the opposite is also true: an unhealthy family culture will inevitably cause children to gravitate to screens to escape loneliness and family dysfunction. "It must be realized," Jean-Claude Larchet reminds us, "that addiction to the Internet and other new media, like addiction to drugs, is at first 'a solution' before it becomes a problem. It is a response to existential problems that are at its root and that must also be treated urgently."[40] Make sure you aren't setting your teenagers up for technological addiction through a negative and toxic family culture.

One common cause of toxicity is erratic, inconsistent parenting with lack of clear boundaries. For example, parents who are concerned about the adverse impact of digital devices may be constantly nagging their children to get off their phones, or to spend less time with computer games, etc. Some parents may even angrily seize their teenager's devices. The lack of clear boundaries invites endless conflict, which ironically creates conditions in which digital addictions are more likely to arise. Once boundaries are in place and clearly defined, and once the children know the parents are not going to budge, then there is nothing more to argue about and the kids can get on with the joy of real life.

An overly negative focus can also characterize training on devices, where the emphasis is on what *not* to do. "*Don't* have your text notifications on while writing an email!" "*Don't* pass on

links without first performing due diligence." "*Don't* go on YouTube when you're tired and have less self-control." Prohibitions are necessary in digital activity just as they are in driving. But a more positive approach would be to frame the discussion along the lines of, "Here are the boundaries and skills that will help you use these devices effectively," just as we might say, "Here are the skills and boundaries that will help you be an effective driver."

Mistake #3: It Could Never Happen to My Child

Never think your child won't find digital porn. Regardless of whether your child is a boy or girl, and regardless of how sheltered they've been, when you give your children a phone, you are giving them a pornography delivery system. Even if your child doesn't find hardcore porn, the soft-porn in advertising and entertainment may irrevocably impact how he or she thinks about intimacy and relationships, especially if accessed while going through puberty.

Many parents think they can solve this problem with parental monitoring apps. But this typically results in the child getting caught, and then feeling so much shame and self-loathing that the child is driven into more secretive behaviors in the future. Better to be preemptive to decrease the likelihood of the child finding porn in the first place.

The best way to be preemptive is, of course, some form of digital minimalism, from not letting your children have access to smartphones and computers to keeping electronics use in a public part of the house. You can also use software that automatically blocks inappropriate content, and which allows parents to exercise remote control of devices, so that porn never becomes an issue in the first place (see footnote 37). But such software solutions aren't foolproof, and finding ways around them is always possible. And even if you do everything right in the home, your child may be exposed to porn from a friend's phone, even a friend at church. Thus, the best way to be preemptive is to have age-appropriate open conversation about sex and intimacy from a positive biblical standpoint. Be frank about the temptations so your children feel like you're approachable if they ever need to talk about their struggles or failures.

Mistake #4: All or Nothing

Many parents who have a no-tolerance policy with smartphones, when they do finally let their child have a phone, allow complete unsupervised access. One reason for this is what we mentioned earlier: the type of parents who are technologically skeptical tend to have personalities that make them less incentivized to learn and pass on good digital habits. After all, if the phone is perceived as evil, why spend time learning and passing on the skills and virtues for leveraging it responsibly? But there is an irony on the other side. The parents who are most pro-technology tend also not to be interested in helping their children develop skills and virtues for leveraging technology effectively, let alone developing the type of attention and boundaries that enable one to flourish in the digital ecosystem. Such parents may even dismiss such discussions as legalistic or "Luddite." Ironically, therefore, both technological utopians and technological rejectionists end up depriving their sons and daughters of the skills and virtues needed to use digital technology wisely and effectively.

The solution to these extremes is to reject binary thinking in favor of prudence. Here we can learn a lesson from our approach to automobiles. I (Robin) have written elsewhere about

how the automobile has had a detrimental impact on society and human community, whereas some people think cars have been the best thing since sliced bread. But what we can all agree about is that, given the type of world in which we live, our sons and daughters need to learn the driving skills and virtues. A responsible parent would not simply hand over the car keys to a twelve-year-old, or even a fifteen-year-old, and expect everything to be fine. First, the parent trains the young man or woman to drive safely and responsibly. This happens as Mom and Dad model good driving to their kids and instruct them in driving skills. But modeling and instruction in driving skills is not enough: the parent will also need to offer modelling and instruction in the character traits necessary for being a good driver (i.e., self-discipline, patience, charity, etc.) and the virtues of the mind correlated with good driving (attentiveness, concentration, situational awareness, etc.). As the adolescent learns to drive, boundaries of time and place are also offered for his or her protection.

Similarly with digital interfaces: whether we think these devices should never have been invented, or whether we think they wonderfully enhance human society, we should all be able to agree that, given the type of world in which we live, our kids need to learn digital skills and virtues. A responsible parent will not hand a kid an iPhone any more than car keys and expect everything to be fine; rather, the parent will teach skills, character traits, and virtues constitutive of digital flourishing.

One would hope that technological utopians and technological rejectionists alike could agree that we need to teach our children the character traits and virtues necessary for flourishing online, including moderation, critical thinking, accountability, and the self-regulation skills necessary for attention preservation within the digital ecosystem. After all, the phone is as powerful a tool as the car – in fact, it is *more* powerful since it is a reality-mediating device. Our children deserve nothing less than responsible training and boundaries.

Conclusion: A Positive Vision

There is no doubt that navigating the digital landscape in a way conducive to human flourishing is one of the most significant challenges of our age. Hopefully, the myths, mistakes, and tips outlined in this chapter can give you a toolbox for navigating this challenging landscape. But we would suggest that no matter what specific rules and restrictions you ultimately adopt, the most important thing is to situate your approach within a larger positive vision and pattern for living. This rule of life is not primarily about what we are *against*, but the better things, the permanent and lasting things, the higher goods that we are *for*.

Teenager Amy Crouch, in the Foreword to her father's book *The Tech-Wise Family*, epitomizes this spirit when she writes, "I think the best part of tech-wise parenting, for me, has been its focus on 'something older and better than the newest thing.' The key word is *better*. Tech-wise parenting isn't simply intended to eliminate technology but to put better things in its place."[41] What Amy notes here is vital; there has to be "better things put in its place," or this won't work. For our human desires to be truly formed and shaped towards truth, goodness, and beauty, we can't just remove the bad things; we must replace them with better things. For example,

- Hospitality
- Digital sabbaths to focus on family fun, from cooking together to enjoying board games
- Hobbies

- Phone-free events with other families (i.e., consider hosting a phoneless feast, dance, or sports event where they can't bring devices)
- Phone-free sleep-over for teens

When framed and understood within a positive vision, even the forms of self-denial and self-discipline that we practice have a larger purpose, pointing us towards higher goods and ultimate ends, where even such self-imposed limits can become a joy and actually invigorating and liberating. We might call it technological asceticism, or as Paul Kingsnorth puts it, "technological askesis."[42] Think of how the practice of fasting develops one's strength of will and resolve, or how the self-discipline of exercise develops a sense of confidence and grit. Just as the spiritual life is punctuated by both times of fasting and feasting, so too our technological habits can be characterized by the type of balance that emerges out of well-honed asceticism and self-discipline. We can train and discipline ourselves in a way akin to training for the Marines, preparing for battle, or conditioning for competition. Jonah Martin suggests that "developing a language of asceticism around our access to (and consumption of) information" is key for human flourishing in the digital age.[43]

We'd like to end with the story of one girl who found freedom in digital minimalism.

Aubrey is Sophomore in high school and has had an iPhone ever since she was thirteen. At first Aubrey hardly used her phone. Over the years, however, she began using it constantly. Although she would never say she was addicted, she found it hard to put her phone down. Even when not actively using it, Aubrey would find herself thinking about the phone, and restless to get back to Snapchat and TikTok.

Aubrey experimented with turning off notifications, only to find herself compelled to check her phone in case she was missing something. It got so bad that when Aubrey would wake up in the night, she'd check her phone. She even started keeping her notifications turned on at night, so she could hear if someone texted her.

Although friends tell her she is attractive, Aubrey finds it hard to believe she's pretty because she's constantly comparing herself to models on TikTok and Instagram. Although she loves hanging out with friends, it's increasingly hard for her to give them full attention because she's distracted. Even when her boyfriend is talking to her, Aubrey finds herself getting restless and instinctively reaching for her phone if there is a lull in the conversation.

Six months ago, Aubrey went on a camping trip with her church youth group. They went into a wilderness where there was no connection. "At first it was disconcerting for my phone not to be working," Aubrey explained when reflecting on the incident. But over the next few days in the wilderness, a sense of quiet came over her that she hadn't experienced in years. "I found I could pay attention to friends with all my attention, because the phone wasn't distracting me. I even found I could sit and do nothing without feeling restless, which is an experience I haven't had in years." Above all, Aubrey enjoyed the new connection she had with the other friends who had come along on the trip.

After returning to civilization, Aubrey determined to use her phone less. Yet she found herself powerless against its relentless pull on her attention. Aubrey longed to recover the peace she had in the wilderness. Eventually she made a hard decision and decided to get rid of her iPhone. She asked her parents to get her a minimalist phone known as the "Light Phone." This

device provides phone and texting functionality and navigation; crucially, however, it provides no email, internet, or social media feeds.

When talking about her decision to embrace technological minimalism, Aubrey explained, "It isn't about saying no to technology, or demonizing technology. I don't judge people who have smartphones. For me, it's about the joy of being present with people. If I need to do things online, I can use my parents' PC. If I find myself bored, I lean into that and use it as an opportunity to embrace stillness, through prayer or through some mindful breathing."

Aubrey is not a real person but is a composite of multiple people we have talked to in the course of writing this book. Throughout the world, men and women are finding ways to use technology without it using them. It's about finding boundaries, but even more importantly, it's about connecting to what is good, true, and beautiful in the world God has given us.

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[1] Robin Phillips, *Gratitude in Life's Trenches: How to Experience the Good Life Even When Everything Is Going Wrong* (Chesterton, Indiana: Ancient Faith Publishing, 2020), chap. 4.

[2] Crouch, *The Tech-Wise Family*; Andy Crouch, *The Life We're Looking For*, First Edition (New York: Convergent Books, an imprint of Random House, 2022).

[3] Cal Newport, *Deep Work: Rules for Focused Success in a Distracted World*, First Edition (New York Boston: Grand Central Publishing, 2016); Cal Newport, *A World without Email: Reimagining Work in an Age of Communication Overload* (New York: Portfolio / Penguin, 2021); Cal Newport, *Digital Minimalism: Choosing a Focused Life in a Noisy World* (London: Penguin Business, 2020).

[4] Jean-Claude Larchet, *The New Media Epidemic: The Undermining of Society, Family, and Our Own Soul*, trans. Archibald Andrew Torrance PhD, None edition (Jordanville, New York: Holy Trinity Publications, 2019).

[5] Crouch, *The Tech-Wise Family*, 18.

[6] Larchet, *The New Media Epidemic*, 155.

[7] Larchet, 156.

[8] Intellectual virtues, also known as cognitive or epistemic virtues, are the class of traits through which the human brain achieves flourishing. Other intellectual virtues include curiosity, reflectiveness, intellectual humility, even-handedness, etc.

[9] Maggie Jackson, *Distracted: The Erosion of Attention and the Coming Dark Age* (Prometheus, 2009), 240.

[10] Maggie Jackson, *Distracted: The Erosion of Attention and the Coming Dark Age*, 6/15/10 edition (Prometheus, 2009), 23.

[11] Jackson, *Distracted*, 2009, 23.

[12] Daniel Goleman, *Focus: The Hidden Driver of Excellence*, Illustrated edition (Harper, 2013).

[13] Stanford University, "Media Multitaskers Pay Mental Price, Stanford Study Shows," *Stanford News* (blog), August 24, 2009, https://news.stanford.edu/2009/08/24/multitask-research-study-082409/.

[14] Eyal Ophir, Clifford Nass, and Anthony D. Wagner, "Cognitive Control in Media Multitaskers," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 106, no. 37 (September 15, 2009): 15583–87, https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.0903620106.

[15] Kep Kee Loh and Ryota Kanai, "Higher Media Multi-Tasking Activity Is Associated with Smaller Gray-Matter Density in the Anterior Cingulate Cortex," *PLOS ONE* 9, no. 9 (September 24, 2014): e106698, https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0106698.

[16] The Editors of TIME, *TIME Mindfulness: The New Science of Health and Happiness* (Time Inc. Books, 2016).

[17] Jackson, *Distracted*, 2009, 73.

[18] David Livermore, "Wait, What? What Smart Phones Do to Our CQ," Cultural Intelligence Center, April 13, 2017, https://culturalq.com/blog/wait-what-what-smart-phones-do-to-our-cq/.

[19] Sandi Mann and Rebekah Cadman, "Does Being Bored Make Us More Creative?," *Creativity Research Journal* 26, no. 2 (April 1, 2014): 165–73, https://doi.org/10.1080/10400419.2014.901073.

[20] Livermore, "Wait, What?"

[21] Livermore.

[22] "Imagine filling a bathtub with a thimble; that's the challenge involved in transferring information from working memory into long-term memory. By regulating the velocity and intensity of information flow, media exert a strong influence on this process. When we read a book, the information faucet provides a steady drip, which we can control by the pace of our reading. Through our single-minded concentration on the text, we can transfer all or most of the information, thimbleful by thimbleful, into long-term memory and forge the rich associations essential to the creation of schemas…. The information flowing into our working memory at any given moment is called our 'cognitive load.' When the load exceeds our mind's ability to store and process the information—when the water overflows the thimble—we're unable to retain the information or to draw connections with the information already stored in our long-term memory. We can't translate the new information into schemas. Our ability to learn suffers, and our understanding remains shallow."

[23] *The Ascetical Homilies of Saint Isaac the Syrian*, 155, Homily 5.

[24] Matthew Guyan, "5 Ways To Reduce Cognitive Load In eLearning," eLearning Industry, November 1, 2013, https://elearningindustry.com/5-ways-to-reduce-cognitive-load-in-elearning.

[25] Carr, *The Shallows*, 124.

[26] Joshua Pauling, Email Message to Jonah Martin, January 13, 2024.

[27] *The Ascetical Homilies of Saint Isaac the Syrian*, 165, Homily 5.

[28] Malcolm Gladwell, *The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference* (Boston: Back Bay Books, 2002), chap. 5.

[29] Reference work with Roberts

[30] Reference work with Roberts

[31] *The Ascetical Homilies of Saint Isaac the Syrian*, 496, Homily 71.

[32] "Besides influencing how we think, digital technology is altering how we feel, how we behave, and the way in which our brains function. Although we are unaware of these changes in our neural circuitry or brain wiring, these alterations can become permanent with repetition…. As the brain evolves and shifts its focus toward new

technological skills, it drifts away from fundamental social skills, such as reading facial expressions during conversation or grasping the emotional context of a subtle gesture. A Stanford University study found that for every hour we spend on our computers, traditional face-to-face interaction time with other people drops by nearly thirty minutes. With the weakening of the brain's neural circuitry controlling human contact, our social interactions may become awkward, and we tend to misinterpret, and even miss subtle, nonverbal messages.... While the brains of today's Digital Natives are wiring up for rapid-fire cyber searches, the neural circuits that control the more traditional learning methods are neglected and gradually diminished. The pathways for human interaction and communication weaken as customary one-on-one people skills atrophy." Vorgan, "Your iBrain," 2 & 21.

[33] Gary Small and Gigi Vorgan, *iBrain: Surviving the Technological Alteration of the Modern Mind* (New York: Harper, 2009).

[34] Small and Vorgan.

[35] Small and Vorgan.

[36] Larchet, *The New Media Epidemic*, 169.

[37] As of writing this, I (Robin) recommend the system Qustodio. This platform offers a dashboard through which parents can turn on or off apps on all the devices in the family, regardless of whether the device is connected to the home network. It also allows the parents to set limits, track location, block inappropriate content, disable non-essential apps, and much more. At the same time, it is important not to put too much trust in any one system. As Andy Crouch reminds us in The Tech-Wise Family, "no system will provide foolproof protection, but parents who do not implement powerful filters on the data streaming into their home are foolish about both their children's vulnerability and their own." Crouch, *The Tech-Wise Family*, 174.

[38] Crouch, 149.

[39] Crouch, 80.

[40] Larchet, *The New Media Epidemic*, 157.

[41] Crouch, *The Tech-Wise Family*, 11.

[42] Paul Kingsnorth, "The Neon God," Substack newsletter, *The Abbey of Misrule* (blog), April 26, 2023, https://paulkingsnorth.substack.com/p/the-neon-god.

[43] Joshua Pauling, Email Message to Jonah Martin, January 13, 2024.