

Introduction

Beware the barrenness of a busy life.

— Socrates

LET ME BEGIN WITH A STORY.

In a darkened room, a small family gathers. The house is silent except for the padding of stocking feet, the murmur of voices. They sit around a small collection of candles while their father strikes a match. The children's eyes dance with wonder at the flame. Normally, this family would flip a switch. In electric-lit halls, they'd walk with intention, but this night they were left without light.

It was their first power outage. No anomaly in this city. *A storm was coming*, the neighbors had said. The parents had laughed it off, standing on the deck hours earlier. They knew the evening's calm. This night would be no different.

They'd just put their youngest child to bed when the house surged into a liquid lull, blackness filling the cavernous living room like a pot of coffee poured out cold. They went in search of the lone flashlight, the one plugged in the wall near the sliding back door. The outward glow of the moon seeped in like a hum and led their hands to the handheld device saved just for such an occasion.

Soon, neighbors began their rounds, knocking on doors, trading candles and beers. Little clusters of candlelight sprung up on front steps. Cheer and laughter spilled out of doors, across darkened pavement, well into the night.

In a town a few miles away, another family is readying for bed. Lantern light fills the rooms as they go about their nighttime routine. Each person steps to the sink, brushes their teeth, scrubs their face. Singing their evening songs, they follow the lantern up stairs to change into their pajamas, though their feet know the steps by rote. It's too dark to read the storybooks now, but the shrieks, laughter and conversations continue as thick blankets are pulled back and little bodies scamper into bed. Parents sing prayers and cuddle up with the youngest as they fall asleep. Day has ended, the fire downstairs is dimming, and soon all will be quiet. Husband and wife gather close in their bed. Tomorrow, at dawn, the day will begin again with the same rhythms.

Back in the city, the family wakes to the groans of a garbage truck lumbering by. Otherwise, it's eerily quiet: no music, no coffee brewing. The old floor boards creak with every step as the first member begins their descent to the living room. Soon everyone is up.

A breakfast of yogurt and cereal is cobbled together in ceramic bowls. Everyone bundles up into snow suits and spends the morning climbing snow banks and careening down on sleds. Afterwards, hands wrap around mugs of hot chocolate (as luck would have it, the gas stove is still working), and dusty board games are tugged down from the shelf. The last phone screen goes black as the remaining power drains out.

The day moves slowly, until it is evening again and everyone is back in their pajamas gathered on the living room floor. The four-year-old daughter pipes up and says what everyone else is thinking:

“Today was a really good day.”

A Really Good Day

Kids experience joy all of the time, without knowing it. “Children are often in a state of joy, and it's because they're present, they're living in the moment, they're not focused on their worry about the future or concerns about the past. They're enjoying their moment now,” says Dr. Joti Samra, a professor of psychology at Simon Fraser University in Vancouver, BC.

Statistics tell us that most of us are not living with this kind of joy; we are not living our very good days. Instead, we are living in silos. In rooms all over the city, we are gathered side-by-side in cubicles, high above spider-legged byways, spending the currency of our lives in front of MacBook Pros with retina displays, iPads and Androids. Little “poolunk” sounds indicate messages received, interrupting conversations, thoughts and feelings. Neighbors are tucked indoors. Our energies, creativity and time — perhaps the best of us — are being spent committed to screens. Already our gadgets are wearable and, sooner than we think, they’ll be under our skin.

Our world is aflutter with a kind of technological mysticism.

“New is better. But these technologies come with an onslaught of unintended consequences.

Easy is better. But as machines do more work for us, we do less; we’re less capable on our own.

More is better. But as machines store and organize more, we get sloppy, forget our friend’s phone number, birthday, heart-felt concerns.

Faster is better. But as machines enter our way of thinking, we bias speed itself; we lose our capacity for patience. Forget things take time.”

— *Geez* magazine, Issue 20, Winter 2010

We weren’t born with smartphones in our hands, and we won’t be tweeting our own death notices, yet these are the items that dominate our every moment.

Dr. Read Schuchardt, a media ecologist from New York University, explains our digital compulsions this way: “It is very difficult to step out of the immediacy, the ‘necessity’ of media and say ‘maybe I don’t need this’ because we believe we have control over their effects because we made these technologies. But the truth is, we make our technologies and they remake us in their image and for their purposes.”

We’ve become accustomed to a new way of being *alone together*, says early Internet champion Sherry Turkle, now a growing skeptic. “Technology-enabled, we are able to be with one another, and also elsewhere, connected

to wherever we want to be. We want to customize our lives. We want to move in and out of where we are because the thing we value most is control over where we focus our attention.”

In my own life, I wanted to untangle the web of my online engagements, so I gave up the Internet for 31 days. I was tired of Facebook mediating my relationships and discontented with my compulsion to constantly check-in online. I knew the Internet was allowing me to emotionally disengage from myself and my loved ones. I was living in a constant state of information overload and a vacuum of joy. I had too much information and not enough wonder. I was seeking beyond what Sherry Turkle calls “our steady state of distracted connectedness.”

My “fast” consisted of disabling data on my smartphone and completely turning off my email. I chronicled my experience with a letter a day, complete with news clippings, quotes and thoughts on technology. Each letter was hand- or type-written, mailed, then scanned and posted to a blog by my friend, Marisa Ducklow, creating a conversation between friends and open to the world at large. These letters (some of which are included) set out a narrative that examines the implications, both good and bad, of a technologically focused life. The experience, chronicled as the project, *Letters from a Luddite*, fueled my passion for exploring the intersection of technology, relationships and joy and led to the writing of this book.

The Joy of Missing Out examines the implications of a technologically focused life and the dynamic possibilities for those longing to cultivate a richer on- and off-line existence. Using historical data, type-written letters, “Chapter Challenges,” and personal accounts, I make the case for increasing the intentionality in our day-to-day lives, offering solutions for living in a wired world.

This book is divided into three parts. The first section examines the issues, focusing on the rise of passivity, isolation and increased cultural anxiety. It explores the progression from electricity and the telegraph to instantaneous communication — and the massive global shifts in the way we interact with one another.

So, in the first section, we step back to put our lives in context.

The second part focuses on *presentness* and what we can expect to find when we do a fast from the Internet, finding new rhythms in our online pursuits. It explores the writing and research on “getting things done,” the

impacts of implementing constraints on technology, the outputs of less “connected” individuals, and the impacts of our daily Internet consumption.

The third part of this book considers solutions for living in a wired world. It reveals how key shifts in our thinking can enable us to draw closer to one another, taking up the good burdens of local work and responsibilities. It explores the value of focus, the necessity of viewing the Web as a tool, and the meaning we find in more limited connections. It reconsiders the Western values of power, control and success, revealing how wonder, trust and discipline are central to the experience of being human and the keys to our joy.

By understanding our online habits, we can form new ones — as we seek to be fully human in a smartphone world.

There is life beyond the silo. You can find it. Let this book be your guide.



1

Personhood

The Greatest Tablet in the World

*Out of the crooked timber of humanity,
nothing entirely straight can be built.*

— Kant

MY EYES ARE BRIGHT WITH READINESS.

I hoist myself upon the metal frame, balancing as I locate the pedals beneath my feet, readying for the open road. I've waited for this ride for days, years. It has long been a dream of mine to pedal a basket-adorned bicycle down a long country road, and today is the culmination of this small, yet urgent dream.

I climb on. Steady myself. Sneakers resting firmly as my hands close in around the black-speckled handlebars. I check the road: empty. And I am off.

Quickly, I'm barreling down Thomas Haynes Drive, past the Ecological Reserve and an indifferent herd of 15 or so cattle. I continue. It's 11 AM and the sun is nearly straight overhead, but a gentle breeze is carrying me — cooling my already-flushed cheeks, combing my loosely-tied hair and peeling the fatigue from my frame and my face, replacing it with calmness. Joy.

I press on, and pedal up the hills. Shoulder-high corn fields pass me on the right. I can see they're nearly ready for picking. The Dover Creek Farm disappears behind me, on my left. Cracks, creases and patchwork cement flow beneath my sneakers as they pedal wildly. And I am free.

This ride feels like living. Like life after numb. The remembering, the carelessness of childhood which is, in its essence, the most true living of all. It's the perfect embrace of beauty. Of time and place. The unhurried presentness a seven-year-old has mastered. She hasn't had time to numb. She hasn't yet descended into the torturous loss of perfect love. She hasn't said goodbye to daddy, mommy. She hasn't yet locked up the first, middle or last parts of her heart. Her eyes are still fierce with life, clear as an untouched glacial spring. She is new. She is here. She is now.

I bend low, careening down a steep hill, when, suddenly, a deer appears in the clearing. As I slow, my foot grazes the spokes, startling the animal who turns and darts from the shoulder just as I pass.

I am well over half-way. My destination: the Junction Café in the heart of town, which later reminds me of the Whistlestop from the film *Fried Green Tomatoes*, which I love.

I am coasting now. I close my eyes, just for a moment. I want to feel the ride without seeing it. Scents and sounds emerge: the soft whistling of wind streaming past my ears, and the smells drawn through my nostrils — a mixture of dried straw, distant manure and the freshness of this morning's early dew.

I reemerge to the startle of a sprinkler throwing a refreshing haze onto my course. It lasts for: *one-mississippi, two-mississippi, three . . . gone*. My legs are beginning to tire, but yesterday's drive reminds me there are only a few miles of straight road ahead. I sigh and reach for my water bottle.

I can feel the greyness fleeing. Colors are becoming more vivid. The greens are a rainbow now: autumn winter tones, lemonade, ginger, palm — the world is spilling over. I can feel my breath slow. Deeper now, deeper. I am slipping, now, along the road, effortlessly.

And later, in the heart of this small northwestern town, I pick a book off the coffee shop shelf and read this:

“For man, the vast marvel is to be alive. For man, as for flower and beast and bird, the supreme triumph is to be most vividly, most perfectly alive. . . . We ought to dance with rapture that we should be alive and in the flesh, and part of the living, incarnate cosmos.”

— D. H. Lawrence, *Apocalypse*

Yes, indeed.

Seeing Life

“To see life; to see the world; to eyewitness great events; to watch the faces of the poor and the gestures of the proud; to see strange things — machines, armies, multitudes, shadows in the jungle and on the moon; to see man’s work — his paintings, towers, and discoveries; to see things thousands of miles away, things hidden behind walls and within rooms, things dangerous to come to; to see women that men love and many children; to see and take pleasure in seeing; to see and be amazed; to see and be instructed.”

— Henry Luce

For nearly a century, these words guided *LIFE*, the world’s preeminent photojournalism magazine. The motto, written by *LIFE*’s founding editor Henry Luce, still resonates.

Poverty. Prosperity. Success. Sickness. Life. It’s not tidy. In the flood of birth, the stillness of death, and everywhere in between, life is a mess. People are not strong; we are needy, frail. Alone we falter, together we rise. When we peel back the pages of time, we see this has always been the way. Some things never change.

The Design of People

We are living in an upside-down world. Our wild, strong bodies are sedentary. Intimacy is down, and passivity and isolation are up. Our weak, needy hearts are lonely. We are anxious, tired, overwhelmed, and addicted to technologies we don’t fully understand, yet our culture has little to say about something we all feel. We are barreling down the highway of technological “progress,” and no one’s got the playbook; the rules of the road are yet to be written.

One powerful factor that shields technology from serious examination, says philosopher Albert Borgmann, is liberal democratic individualism: the notion that the individual is to be the judge of what is the good life for him or her. But,

“Sit as little as possible; credit no thought not born in the open and while moving freely about — in which the muscles do not hold festival.”

— Friedrich Nietzsche

perhaps, there *is* a universal good life. And to find it, we must take notes from the signposts all around us.

The Greatest Tablet in the World

The human eye, with its retina and ocular nerves, is magnificent in its design, and, astoundingly, no different today than it was thousands of years ago.

For millennia, human infants have preferred to look at faces that engage them with a mutual gaze; this leads to the formation of the synapses necessary for socializing and founding relationships. It is within our first six months of life that, by probing people's eyes and faces for positive or negative mood signs, we learn who to trust, how to smile, and that eyes are the indicators of where our attention lies.

We are face readers
from infancy.

It is said that the eye is the gateway to the soul. Eyes seek out other eyes and, through a series of rapid, repeated scans of the face and body, we decipher the social and emotional information needed to nurture, flirt, sell, teach, converse and make love.

Connected to the eyes is the face, vital to the expression of emotion among humans and among numerous other species. Even more than our eyes, the face is crucial for human identity; any damage such as scarring or developmental deformities has effects stretching beyond those of solely physical inconvenience.

Facial expression is vital for human recognition and communication, and the more than 40 facial muscles in a human face control our expressions as we respond to touch, temperature, smell, taste, sounds and visual stimuli.

Human communication, according to South African academic Rembrandt Klover, is underpinned by a social survival imperative, because we are not, as he puts it, "merely brains in nutrient-rich vats that can exist in isolation of other humans." We are brains, clad in bodies that interact with other body-clad brains in order to exist, survive and thrive.

Being able to read emotion in another's face is the fundamental basis for empathy. The ability to interpret a person's reactions and predict the probability of others' behaviors is called *mirroring*. The process of learning and teaching, of communication, involves exchange, back and forth. It's

why calling someone and getting their voicemail or posting updates online without an exchange of ideas can feel flat.

Reading people is a learned skill. A recent study looking at individuals judging forced and genuine smiles found that older adult participants outperformed young adults in distinguishing between posed and spontaneous smiles. This suggests that with experience and age we become more accurate at perceiving true emotions.

Some studies show that eye contact has a positive impact on the retention and recall of information and may promote more efficient learning. This is important to note because, as we will learn in Chapter 12, people — adolescents in particular — who communicate primarily by text, are losing their ability to read faces and, subsequently, to empathize. (For more on this, read about award-winning actor Astrid van Wieren's work coaching kids and teens in reading facial expression.)

Finally, the human body. According to Klopper, the psyches and metabolisms of modern humans were forged over eons of hunter-gatherer nomadic existence, and our ancient nomadic souls are incongruent with our present-day sedentary existence. It is widely accepted that the average adult needs at least an hour of physical work a day and eight to nine hours of sleep every night to function *optimally*.

Eyes, face, mouth, body. You could say that the human is the original mobile communications device.

The Shape of Things

Our world began with wide open spaces, with room and time for exploration. Imagine, from where you sit: green forest and land expanding as far as the eye can see. In the morning, you wake as the sun rises, and go to sleep as the moon begins its slow ascent. Babies are birthed, food is gathered. Days are filled tending to children, teaching, hunting, gathering, talking, cooking and eating. Ideas are had, land is cultivated, homesteads are raised. The seasons and sun set the course of time. A time to sow and a time to reap. A time to rise and a time to sleep. Then, like now, a time to be born and a time to die. A time for joy and a time for sorrow.

It's said that there is nothing new under the sun. But there *is* something new: the way we *think*. What we hold to be true. We believe as a culture,

way deep in our core, that we *are* something new. That *we* are different: more evolved, more advanced, smarter. But are we so different?

The Ties That Bind

We haven't found a way around the nine-month human gestation. There are few things that everyone can agree on, but the fact of our birth is one. The design of procreation requires serious consideration; it is perhaps the only core marker that we all can agree on in terms of a base-level design. You may or may not believe in a conscious creator, God, but you do accept the irrefutable fact that you were born. We were all conceived and born in weakness. While nation, religion and politics may divide, this single fact binds.

We are vulnerable beings. We were born with absolute need. We were cared for and raised, for better or worse, in community and defined in every meaningful way by that experience. The values we hold, the habits we hope to unlearn — these were all learned through relationship.

All seven billion of us share the same biological needs. We each have only one body and only 24 hours in each day. We are constrained by the amount of time we have and by our physical makeup, providing a tangible framework for our lives. We have to eat. We have to sleep. We have to talk to people to work, to play, to procreate, and simply to keep us out of the loony bin. We live in light of this design. It should tell us much about our purpose.

We have real bodies with real limitations in real time. Have you ever considered why?

We can view this humanness, and our ensuing mortality, in one of two ways. First, as a limitation, with the connected feeling of being trapped. Or, as a framework, leading to a feeling of freedom within created design. We can try skirting around our design, like sleep hacking and running at treadmill desks, or we can consider them as signposts for how to construct our lives.

What People Are For

“To be human,” says Jean Vanier, founder of L’Arche, an international network of communities for people with intellectual disabilities, “means to remain connected to our humanness and to reality.”

If we are to take human design as the blueprint for our purposes, then we might draw the conclusion that people are *for* three things:

- *We were made to feel.*
- *We were made for relationship.*
- *We were made for work.*

The Fidelity of Work

In Montana a hundred years ago, as Albert Borgmann recounts in his 1984 book *Technology and the Character of Contemporary Life*, warmth in the home came by way of the fireplace, better known then as the hearth.

The heat was not instantaneous because work first had to be done: trees felled; wood sawed, split and stacked; kindling carried and a fire built in the stove or fireplace. As Borgmann points out, it was not an entirely safe method of heating though, because one could get burned or set the house on fire. It was also not easy work; skills and attention were constantly required to build and sustain the fire.

“A stove used to furnish more than mere warmth. It was a *focus*, a hearth, a place that gathered the work and leisure of a family and gave the house a center. Its coldness marked the morning, and the spreading of its warmth, the beginning of the day. It assigned to the different family members tasks that defined their place in the household. The mother built the fire, the children kept the firebox filled, and the father cut the firewood. It provided for the entire family a regular and bodily engagement with the rhythm of the seasons that was woven together of the threat of cold and the solace of warmth, the smell of wood smoke, the exertion of sawing and of carrying, the teaching of skills, and the fidelity of daily tasks.”

In the 21st century, we are taught to think of the elements of the fire and its related work as burdensome, and they are and were undoubtedly so experienced. But the familial work in creating the warmth for the home required skill, attention and strength — there was a fidelity to the work as each family member fulfilled their role, and this gave the work meaning.

Today, the central heating systems omnipresent in modern city life make no demands on our skill, attention or strength, and their presence is largely concealed. A burden has been lifted, or has it?

Unsurprisingly, one of the families described at the beginning of the Introduction was Amish. More than a century ago, their forebears decided to slow their adoption of new technologies. It was an extremely deliberate choice, and their commitment to that choice has been absolute. The city family, on the other hand, did not choose to be without lights and appliances. Instead, against their will, they experienced an unexpected halt to their modern comforts, and in that lack they found something unexpected: joy.

This is something for us to consider.

When the city family found themselves without power, they found themselves with new constraints, and within those constraints they found new opportunities for action and connection. When the power returned, they had the opportunity to choose which appliances and gadgets to reconnect and which to leave behind.

We have the same opportunity.

“With our time
and presence
we give love.
Simple.”

— Kim John Payne

Good Burdens

What happens when technology moves beyond lifting genuine burdens and starts freeing us from burdens that we should not want to be rid of? We will spend the rest of this book considering this linchpin question, posed by Albert Borgmann.

If we believe that we, as humans, were created for relationship and meaningful work, work that provides for families and serves neighbors, work that engages our bodies and creative faculties, then it follows that we would value a certain kind of burden. Let’s call them *good burdens*: responsibilities that tether us to people and the physical world.

“Consider, for instance, the burden of preparing a meal and getting everyone to show up at the table and sit down,” says Borgmann, a philosopher at the University of Montana. “Or the burden of reading poetry to one another or going for a walk after dinner. Or the burden of letter-writing — gathering our thoughts, setting them down in a way that will be remembered and cherished and perhaps passed on to our grandchildren. These are the activities that have been obliterated by the readily available

entertainment offered by TV” — and every other screen in the 21st-century home.

“The burdensome part of these activities is actually just the task of getting across a threshold of effort,” Borgmann continues. “As soon as you have crossed the threshold, the burden disappears.”

Have we, by outsourcing the work of our lives, outsourced the living of life?

What if, by outsourcing the work, we are outsourcing the living of life?

The Quotidian Mysteries

Kathleen Norris, the international bestselling author of *Dakota: A Spiritual Biography* and *The Cloister Walk*, echoes Borgmann’s sentiments and turned heads with her Madeleva Lecture: “The Quotidian Mysteries: Laundry, Liturgy and ‘Women’s Work.’”

Before an audience of academic women, she argued: “It is precisely these thankless, boring, repetitive tasks that are hardest for the workaholic or utilitarian mind to appreciate.” Children, on the other hand, approach the washing “for the sheer joy of it — the tickle of the water on the skin . . . It is difficult for adults to be so at play with daily tasks in the world.”

As Norris paints so poetically, joy can be found in repetitive physical work because our minds are able to wander — and we are reminded of our smallness in the gravity of the mundane.

“Repetition is reality,” wrote Søren Kierkegaard.

And, indeed, it is. We might enjoy a flight of fancy or experience a breathtaking vacation but, in the end, we return to dishes. In Norris’s view, this isn’t to be shunned.

Sylvia Plath, in her semi-autobiographical novel, *The Bell Jar*, wrote that her character, Esther Greenwood, wanted to be done with things, at once, forever. She wanted to be free of reality. And tragically, in the end, she was.

As I write this book, I have three children, ages four, two, and six months. Every day, their all-so-tangible needs clamor against me, stirring me to rise again and again to the occasion. I am no stranger to the discontentment this kind of thankless work can breed, but in it I have found profound moments of gratefulness. My children keep me alert, attached to the real world. Without them I would spend my days the way I tend to spend my

What if we learned to be at play in the tasks of the day?.

evenings: sedentary, eyes glued to screen. Instead, I am forced *awake*.

Sedentary Bodies, Sedentary Minds

When a body is not used, what happens? It seems that every day there is a new study or article outlining the pitfalls of a sedentary lifestyle. We sleep, we drive, we sit. When a body is not used, such as in the case of a patient relegated to a hospital bed, it literally begins to decompose. Many of us have witnessed this in aging parents or hospitalized friends. I've seen it with my own eyes as my mother's body diminished, losing the ability to stand or sit up, under the burden of colon cancer.

Put simply, our bodies were made for moving. But, instead, many of us are sitting 15 hours a day, spending the majority of our waking moments on the couch, in an office chair, or in the car. By not moving, our risk of heart disease has increased by up to 64 percent; we've shaved off seven years of quality life, and we're more at risk for certain types of cancer.

Thanks to Uber, Lyft or Sidecar, we can call a car to get us with the tap of an app. We no longer need to think about the kinds of clothes we like to wear; an algorithm can do that. Clothes dirty? There's a pick-up and delivery service for that. Hungry? Order takeout. Sick of dishes? Stock up on paper plates. I heard of one guy who didn't have to leave his apartment for an entire year by availing himself of the wonders of eBay and FedEx.com.

Next stop: the "smart house."

"Sophistication reaches a critical mass as it does in a so-called smart house," says Albert Borgmann in an interview with David Wood at the University of Chicago (1999) "where every last and least domestic chore and burden is anticipated and taken over by an automatic device, inhabitants become the passive content of their sophisticated container. The vision of such an environment often carries the implied promise that people will use their disburdened condition creatively and inventively. But assuming that in the smart house the blandishments of cyberspace will present themselves with even greater diversity and glamour, most people

We know what happens to a muscle when it is not used: it atrophies and dies. Our brain is our greatest muscle.

will likely do what they now do — they will immerse themselves in the warm bath of electronic entertainment.”

And so we do.

We understand the causes and effects of the sedentary body, but, as the Internet takes over and our memory is needed less and less, what happens to our sedentary *minds*?

I share Albert Borgmann’s view that humans are essentially embodied beings and therefore cannot escape their bodies no matter how or what they think of themselves.

“The crucial error these days is not to think of oneself as a machine but to shift one’s moral center of gravity into a machine of sorts — cyberspace,” he says. And the temptation to entrust our curiosity and desires primarily to the Internet will only grow. “To do so is not to commit a cognitive error but to become an accomplice in the diminishment of one’s person and one’s world. Just as you cannot escape your body, you cannot really and finally escape reality.” [And, I argue, nor should you want to.] “But you can degrade to utilities what should be celebrated as the splendor of tangible presence.”

As we slip further and further away from the fidelity of our design, the world has become complicated, and we have grown aimless and weary in the process. But we don’t have to remain here; we can untangle the web, pull back the layers of our complicated 21st-century lives and chart a new course.

The Law of Unintended Consequences

Black Mirror, the Emmy award-winning BBC series written by Charlie Brooker, satirizes real-life cutting-edge technologies. “Over the last ten years, technology has transformed almost every aspect of our lives before

In the absence of physical work, we turn to consumerism. Remember the Capitol in the *The Hunger Games*?

“Whether one life is enough or not enough, one life is all we get, at least only one life here, only one life in this gorgeous hair-raising world, only one life with the range of possibilities for doing and being that are open to us now ... we tend to live as though our lives would go on forever. We spend our lives like drunken sailors.”

— Frederick Buechner

we've had time to stop and question it," say the show's creators. "In every home; on every desk; in every palm — a plasma screen; a monitor; a smart-phone — a black mirror of our 21st-century existence. Our grip on reality is shifting."

In the episode, "Be Right Back," Martha is devastated when her partner, Ash, is killed in a road accident the day after they move out to a country cottage. At his funeral, Martha's friend Sarah tells her about a new service that allows people to stay in touch with the deceased. By using all his past online communications and social media profiles, a new "Ash" can be created — as a voice on her phone and finally, in the most-advanced version, as a bot. Martha is disgusted by the concept but then, in a confused and lonely state after learning she is pregnant, she decides to talk to "him."

When we draw our technological future out to its logical conclusions, as Charlie Brooker has done in *Black Mirror*, we see a future not far out of reach. The technology to create a bot in our dead spouse's image to help us grieve is not an impossibility.

But it is also not an *inevitability*.

The Future Is Not an Inevitability

Many people in Silicon Valley speak about our technological future like this as an inevitability. In her book *Dot Complicated*, Randi Zuckerberg (sister to *that* Zuckerberg) writes about pursuing an online life as fulfilling as our offline one. But, in light of our physical bodies and deeper humanity, how could that ever be true and why are we working so hard to make it so?

As my mother has always reminded me, life is choices. We, through our acts of creation, condoning and consumption, are choosing our collective future.

The technologies that save lives, the databases that expedite hospital work, the search and rescue capabilities enabled by global positioning systems — these are all tools that *help*, that bless and serve our lives; they are about betterment, they lift genuine burdens. These same technologies, however, are being adapted and repackaged in myriad ways that are drawing us further away from one another, from meaningful engagement with the world and, ultimately, away from what it means to be human.

But all of this comes down to belief. If we believe that people are here to consume for consumption's sake, that we are all a string of random

molecules smashed together for some unknown future, then there is little binding us to moral and social implications. But if we believe that there is some design to our world, to our bodies, minds and inner lives, then we must pause and consider our future in light of this question: *What are people for?*

Instead of altering or avoiding these purposes, the relationships and work that gives us meaning, we should be spending our lives seeking to live more deeply from them.

Why did Segway (the two-wheeled, self-balancing personal transport system) fail as a globally embraced human transport system? Because we were made to *walk*.