



## NEIGHBORHOOD UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH

### Unplug to Reconnect

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Today my daughter turns 6 months old! It's been incredible to watch her come into her own over these last few months. She's strong, focused, fierce, and resilient. Right now she is in a phase of reaching for everything, especially what is in my hands. Whether that is a toothbrush, spoon or coffee cup, she is fascinated with the dozens ordinary objects I unconsciously pick up throughout my day. Through her curiosity, I've become more and more aware of what is in my hand more than any other object, and what object she's come to want to grab the most.

As you might guess, it's my trusty iPhone, my beloved gadget to which I am constantly tethered. When we are playing together, and I look at my phone, she reaches for it. She wants to touch the screen and interact with it. We Facetime Sam and my mother on it and already seems to recognize faces and voices. Being a new parent, it's a bit shocking to see how quickly she is adapting to our wired world. I want her to experience the many wonderful things that technology can provide—information, entertainment, and connection to people and things she loves. But I also want her to be mindful of the pitfalls of technology, and to grow up knowing that she doesn't need it to be happy, peaceful and connected to the world. In short, I want her to have a healthy relationship with technology, just as I wish for myself, and I know all of us wish for ourselves and our children.

Today, I want to explore what it means to have a mindful relationship with technology as a spiritual practice. How do we practice unplugging from technology to reconnect with what we love and value in our life?

As a minister who is "always on" in some way, I've often struggled to have a mindful relationship with technology. Since my daughter was born, I've found myself even more plugged in than ever. Of course, I'm not alone. According a recent study by the global tech company Asurion, Americans check their phones more than 80 times a day. That's a little more than once every 12 minutes or so. If you think that sounds like a lot, another recent study found that the millennial generation checks their phones nearly twice as much, over 150 times a day.

On average, we spend up to four hours a day on our phone, a quarter of our day. Our 24-hours a day news-cycle creates few opportunities for pause. Certainly, this summer, it's hard to take our eyes off the news. We have a government that is running itself like a reality television show and, like any reality show, once you start watching it's really hard to look away. We also have the sense that we shouldn't look away. We need to keep awake and vigilant, we need to be ready and informed when it is time to act. But often, with the saturation and burnout we experience of media and technology, we end up feeling more powerless, lonely, and paralyzed rather than connected and motivated to action. We can't escape our connected reality, but we do need to be aware of the spiritual and emotional effect it has on us. We need to be more intentional about how we use the tool of technology to keep us connected, awake and engaged with our world.

Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh has told this story to his young monks preparing for a 90 silent day retreat which will abstain from internet. It's good for us regular people to remember that even monks also have a hard time disconnecting from technology!

There is a Zen story about a person sitting on a horse, galloping very quickly. At a crossroads, a friend of his shouts, “Where are you going?” The man says, “I don’t know, ask the horse!” This is our situation. The horse is technology. It carries us and we cannot control it. So we have to begin with intention, asking ourselves, what do we want?

I like this image of technology as the horse, taking us off course without us even being aware of where we are going. I think of the times I’ve picked my phone up to check my email or Facebook, and an hour later I’ve ended up far from where I started, mindlessly scrolling and often times purchasing something I never needed in the first place. The horse has taken me off course and I have forgotten where I was going altogether. In moments like these we can become so enmeshed with our technology that many of us can’t imagine what unplugging could look like or feel like. Some of our use of technology is conscious and intentional, but much of it is not.

Writer Catherine Price has a new book out called *How to Break Up With Your Phone*. Our lives are made meaningful by what we pay attention to, consciously and unconsciously. She calls using technology like playing the slot machines in a casino. Sometimes you hit the jackpot, mining the internet for some new gem, but most of the time, you are simply gambling away your time, the most precious commodity of our lives. In Price’s view, a healthy relationship with technology is becoming more mindful of how we are using it. She poses three questions we can ask ourselves when we go to reach for our phone, turn on the tv, or open our lap top.

What for? Why now? And what else?

These three questions are helpful to create a little bit of space between ourselves and technology to be more aware of how we use it.

The first question—what for—asks us to answer why we are using technology in the first place.

The second—why now—asks us to become aware of when we are driven to use technology.

And the third—what else—asks us to answer what else we might like to be doing if we weren’t using technology in that moment.

I think it’s particularly helpful with each of these questions to think about the feelings that each of us brings to the use of technology. Are we feeling lonely or anxious? How does using the technology make us feel after we use it?

These questions are a good place for us to start thinking about our relationship to technology and how or if we would like to change that relationship. How can we ride the horse of technology instead of letting the horse ride us?

For many of us, summer is a time where we intentionally take time off our time out from our lives to refresh our bodies, minds and our spirits. We seek out beaches and mountains and lakes and wild places where we discover a sense of belonging to nature and family outside of our daily routines. We camp and retreat, oftentimes out of range of Wi-Fi, where it becomes easier to connect with what is truly important in our lives, and to enjoy the bounty of beauty that surrounds us.

Summer is the perfect time to take up mindful practices around technology.

This morning we introduce two practices: the practice of meditation and the practice of digital Sabbath.

George has led us in meditation, which can be done on our own or in groups like this for support and accountability.

And in this hour we practiced taking a digital Sabbath.

How many of you took me up on my challenge to turn off your phone this hour? How did it make you feel being totally out of range for these few minutes? Reflecting back on the year, church is one of the only reliable times during the week that I turn off my phone and completely unplug. Everything at church in its current form is analog, present, unmediated.

This is a way we mark our time as sacred, different, and set apart from the rest of our week. This doesn't mean that from time to time we want to take photos or videos of what's happening in church to share, or to tweet about something that was said, but to be mindful of the possibilities of reconnecting with our deepest selves and being in touch with something greater, whether that something greater is God, community, or the movement for justice.

Today we can start this practice unplugging, and begin to make it a practice for our lives on a daily and weekly basis. We can start small, during meal times, or sunset to sunrise as in the Jewish tradition of Shabbat, the weekly pause from work and daily routine to reconnect with God, family and community.

A group of progressive Jewish folks have put together resources for weekly "Digital Sabbaths." In March, the group will lead a National Day of Unplugging where people pledge not to engage with technology for one full day. I've signed our congregation up and will be inviting you to participate with me in taking one full day off from technology. If you're interested, there will be fun ways to get involved in helping us practice unplugging together. For example, they ask that everyone participating uses a "cell phone sleeping bag." Crafters in the congregation—get ready! Their "Digital Sabbath Manifesto," invites participants to take the following actions to live deeper, more joyful and present lives:

01. Avoid technology.
02. Connect with loved ones.
03. Nurture your health.
04. Get outside.
05. Avoid commerce.
06. Light candles
07. Drink the fruit of the vine
08. Eat bread
09. Find silence.
10. Give back.

I close with the words of Ralph Waldo Emerson

I wish that life should not be cheap, but sacred. I wish the days to be as centuries, loaded, fragrant.

May we go forth with the intention to make our days, and our lives more joyful, peaceful, present, and free.

May it be so and amen.