

We Should Be More ‘Amish’ About Technology

By Tish Harrison Warren, *The New York Times*, May 21, 2023

5 The first time I truly admitted that something was awry with my use of social media was the day of my daughter’s first-grade Christmas performance in 2019. She’d been anticipating the show for weeks, practicing her song again and again. I’d rearranged my work schedule to be there and was running a little late but could make it in time if I hurried. As I was getting ready to leave, a Twitter conversation was on my mind. [...]

10 So, before I started the car, I hurriedly pulled Twitter up on my phone, checked my mentions and replied. No big deal. I did this all the time. Yet those few minutes ended up making me a few minutes later than I would have been. I entered the auditorium at my daughter’s school moments after her class finished their song. I’d missed it. When my daughter realized I hadn’t seen her sing, her face fell. She didn’t cry or blame me, but she was clearly — and justly — disappointed. I was, too. [...] Today, I recall nothing about that conversation on Twitter — not the topic, not the responses, not the tone. But I will never forget that crestfallen look on my daughter’s face.

15 Over a year later, I still hadn’t quit Twitter, but it had stopped seeming harmless and fun and began to feel like something darker. I told myself I had to stay on social media for my writing career, that I had a civic duty to be in the so-called digital town square, that I could elevate the discourse by trying to always be kind and respectful online and that that was important work. What I wasn’t facing was how much of a habit, even an addiction, online social interaction had become for me. I was either scrolling or tweeting multiple times a day, even when I didn’t want to be, and gave up sleep for it. It was — and still is — embarrassing to admit. I clearly couldn’t avoid social media by willpower alone, so in 2021, friends encouraged me to take
20 more extreme steps.

I now use the same filtering software that my family uses to block pornographic sites to block Twitter. I still maintain an account. [...] I’m still on social media sites like Instagram about once a week or so.

25 But I don’t ever want to go back to how I used to use social media. I think social media is, for the most part, bad for society. It damages democracy, debate and social discourse. [...] I used to say that I was staying on Twitter, even though I thought it wasn’t great for me, to try to make a difference there. [...] What I’ve realized, though, is that the main change I want to see on the internet is for people to be on it less. This has been the big revelation for me, one so obvious that I’d missed it for years.

30 I used to think I could have a strong online presence and still have a rich life offline. I thought I could multitask, toggling seamlessly between the online and material worlds. But every hour, minute or second I spend online is an hour, minute or second that I’m not cultivating something — a relationship, a quiet moment, a connection with nature, a chore, a passing conversation, a daydream — in the physical, analog world. [...]

35 American society could learn from Anabaptist groups, including the Amish. Many of these groups do not, despite popular belief, refuse to use technology. But they are far more discerning than the rest of us about how a given technology will help or hurt their communities. [...]

40 In a fascinating piece on being part of the Bruderhof community, a Christian movement in the Anabaptist tradition, John Rhodes wrote about some guidelines his community uses when it comes to adopting technology. The Bruderhof, who are a different group than the Amish, run successful businesses, drive cars and do not reject technology outright but discern together, as a community, whether a particular technology should be embraced. He writes, “Any use of technology that undermines the richness of human relationships is presumed suspect.” [...] He explains that they do not see things like watching TV or using social media “as a sin; it’s just that we’ve seen how it distracts from more important ways to spend our time, such as reading a book to a child, inviting a lonely neighbor over for tea or painting a picture.”

45 I will probably never join the Bruderhof community, but I think their way of approaching technology with skepticism and caution, seeking the good of the whole community and the flourishing of human beings, is something we can all learn from.