

Spiritual Direction in a Digital Age: Helping People Connect with God in a Distracted World

by Joshua Taylor

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“Let your mind become a lens, thanks to the converging rays of attention; let your soul be all intent on whatever it is that is established in your mind as a dominant, wholly absorbing idea.”

-Antonin-Dalmace-Sertillanges¹

“With new prospects opened up by scientific and technological progress there arise new forms of attacks on the dignity of the human being.”²

-Pope John Paul II

The aim of this paper is to name the digital age we live in and its impact on spirituality. This work seeks to inform spiritual directors of the various factors at play in the lives of 21st century people who are so connected yet at the same time distracted because of the digital world. This paper seeks to inform, guide, and create conversation on this topic with the hope that spiritual directors will be encouraged to develop their practice in response to this cultural moment we find ourselves in.

A Definition of Spiritual Direction

Before we look at the impact of the digital age on spiritual direction it is helpful to outline a definition of spiritual direction. My own view is that spiritual direction is a shared attentiveness to the work of God. A spiritual director pays attention to the work of the God in conversation with the directee and encourages the directee to pay attention to the work of God in their everyday life.³

Attentiveness is a word at the heart of my understanding of spiritual direction. A good spiritual director will be attentive to God’s work in the life of the directee and help the directee to cultivate attentiveness themselves in daily life.⁴ In addition to attentiveness I also believe that spiritual direction has a telos toward growth. There is a goal in mind in the work of spiritual direction and that goal is spiritual growth. In John chapter fifteen Jesus uses the image of a vine that bears fruit as an image of what it means to be “in Christ.” Christian spiritual direction leads to deeper discipleship to Jesus. What is discipleship? The philosopher James K. A. Smith puts it well saying: “Discipleship, we might say, is a way to

¹ Antonin-Dalmace-Sertillanges cited in Cal Newport, *Deep Work: Rules For Focussed Success in a Distracted World* (London: Piaktus, 2016), 33.

² John Paul II, *Evangelium Vitae. Encyclical Letter The Gospel of Life* (Boston: Pauline Books, 1995), 44.

³ This is my own definition that is informed by William A. Barry and William J. Connolly, *The Practice of Spiritual Direction* (New York: Harper Collins, 2009), 8. Barry and Connolly use the term “paying attention” in their definition of spiritual direction too.

⁴ David F. Ford, *The Shape of Living: Spiritual Directions for Everyday Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1997), 155

curate your heart, to be attentive to and intentional about what you love.”⁵ This paper outlines the particular challenges for spiritual directors as they guide people in this process of spiritual growth in what we call “the digital age.”

The Digital Age

What is the digital age? Put simply it is the age in which digital technologies have become ubiquitous. Andrew Sullivan outlines a typical scenario:

Just look around you — at the people crouched over their phones as they walk the streets, or drive their cars, or walk their dogs, or play with their children. Observe yourself in line for coffee, or in a quick work break, or driving, or even just going to the bathroom. Visit an airport and see the sea of craned necks and dead eyes. We have gone from looking up and around to constantly looking down.”⁶

Sullivan’s observation is apt. What is insightful is the way Sullivan notices the aspect of the gaze. It is described as transfixed on screens. If spiritual direction is about attentiveness, then the direction of our gaze matters. This is one of the pressing issues that will be explored in this paper. But first, this section will outline some of the key technologies which shape the digital age in which we live: the smartphone, the internet, and social media.

The smartphone is everywhere we look, and this piece of technology has shaped our lives in the digital age in multiple ways. Phones give us connection 24-7, making us highly accessible. Yet at the same time paradoxically they disconnect us. Research has shown that even the presence of a phone on the table impacts a conversation.⁷ Sherry Turkle names the three wishes that a smartphone grants its user: “first, that we will always be heard; second, that we can put our attention wherever we want it to be, and third, that we will never have to be alone.”⁸ These realities all have a profound impact on our attention.

The smart phone is made possible only by another medium which has changed how we live more than any other, the internet. Computer scientist Cal Newport says that the internet has created a “culture of connectivity.”⁹ We take in far more information than before and are expected to be available more than ever before, and as a result the internet predisposes us toward shallowness rather than depth.¹⁰ A culture of connectivity has

⁵ James K. A. Smith, *You are What you Love: The Spiritual Power of Habit* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2016), Kindle edition, Location 101.

⁶ Andrew Sullivan “I used to be a Human Being” Accessed on 21/10/20220 at

<https://nymag.com/intelligencer/2016/09/andrew-sullivan-my-distraction-sickness-and-yours.html>

⁷ Sherry Turkle, *Reclaiming Conversation: The Power of Talk in a Digital Age*. (New York: Penguin Press, 2015), 21.

⁸ Turkle, *Reclaiming Conversation*, 26.

⁹ Cal Newport, *Deep Work: Rules For Focussed Success in a Distracted World* (London: Piaktus, 2016), 56.

¹⁰ Newport *Deep Work*, 7.

negative implications for our ability to contemplate, be in solitude, and maintain healthy relationships.¹¹

One of the most recent phenomena in our digital age is the rise of social media across various platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter. The popularity and amount of time spent on social media platforms is hard to capture. Yet anyone who has browsed Facebook knows it is easy to spend countless hours scrolling.¹² Not only does social media claim our attention, it also has an impact on mental health and our self-understanding. Our deepest self, our very soul is perhaps shaped by the world of social media more than we might think.

Life in the digital age is shaped by these technologies. It is easy to assume that technologies are neutral, that they are simply tools, yet according to those who have studied technology use, it is much more complicated.¹³ Nicholas Carr who has written ground-breaking study on the impact of the internet on the human brain says:

As our window onto the world, and onto ourselves, a popular medium moulds what we see and how we see it – and eventually, if we use it enough, it changes who we are as individuals and society...our focus on a medium's contents can blind us to these deep effects. We're too busy being dazzled or disturbed by the programming to notice what's going on inside our heads. In the end, we come to pretend that the technology itself doesn't matter."¹⁴

Spiritual directors in the 21st century would be wise to heed Carr's words. People will come to spiritual direction being shaped and formed by the digital technologies in their lives. Ruth Hayley Barton speaks of us having a "relationship with technology" and it is helpful to think about it in such intimate terms, after all many people spend a lot of time online and with their devices. Some will even unconsciously treat these devices like default spiritual directors and guides.¹⁵ Digital devices, as wonderful as they are in so many ways, do not

¹¹ I acknowledge that connectivity has potential to aid spiritual practices via apps such as Lectio Divina 365 for example. However, the philosophy of it leans toward shallowness not depth.

¹² Jonathan Taplin, *Move Fast and Break Things: How Facebook, Google, and Amazon have cornered culture and what it means for all of us* (London: MacMillan, 2017), 150. Taplin Says: "In 2014, Facebook's 1.23 billion regular users logged in to the site for seventeen minutes each day – as the New York Times pointed out. In total, that's more than 39,757 years of time collectively spent on? Facebook in a single day."

¹³ It's important for me to state here the complexity of this issue. There are of course many positive aspects of living in a digital age. I enjoy the internet and certain aspects of social media. This essay for sake of brevity and clarity focuses on the way that digital technologies impede spiritual growth and depth, especially focusing on the aspect of distraction in its multiple forms.

¹⁴ Nicholas Carr, *The Shallows: How the Internet is Changing the Way we Think, Read, and Remember* (New York: M. W. Norton and Company, Inc., 2010), 3.

¹⁵ Ruth Hayley Barton, *Invitation to Retreat: The Gift and Necessity of Time Away with God* (Downers Grove IL: InterVarsity Press), Kindle edition. Location 326, Barton says: "A case could be made that by giving so much of our time, attention, and priority to what takes place in and through technology, we are saying, 'This is what interests me. This is what I most value. This is where I am searching for answers. This is what makes me feel okay. This is what will save me.'"

function well as spiritual directors, neither do they tend to form us in healthy ways. It seems that amongst many users of digital technologies this is becoming obvious and there is a feeling that something is amiss. Newport names it well:

What's making us uncomfortable, in other words, is this feeling of losing control – a feeling that instantiates itself in a dozen different ways each day, such as when we tune out with our phone during our child's bath time, or lose our ability to enjoy a nice moment without a frantic urge to document it for a virtual audience.¹⁶

This experience highlights the way we are being shaped by technology. Digital technologies have burst on to the scene in a short amount of time and humanity is playing catch up. As one writer puts it “We are living through a unique period of human history, an intense period of flux, change, and disruption that may never be repeated.”¹⁷ It is worth noting the experimental nature of new technologies. Where once the town square or local café was the place to meet, gossip, and make friends, virtual space has become the new primary terrain for the coming generations in forging these social connections.¹⁸ This paper seeks to explore the way this new terrain shapes our spirituality so that spiritual directors can be aware of the challenges many people face as they navigate this digital age.

The Impact of the Digital on our Spirituality

Part 1: Our Attention

Our digital devices have had a huge impact on our attention. Consider the following story of a young man and his inability to sit still:

'I was just sitting there in my dorm room yesterday,' one of the students was saying, “watching as the snowflakes were hitting the window and sliding down the glass.” This student noticed how beautiful the snow was, the way it piled up and crystallized. He also noticed how peaceful he felt while watching it. But then, suddenly, in the silence and the stillness, other thoughts began to intrude, bigger thoughts about his life and what he was doing with it, or even more worrisome, what he was not doing with it. He began to feel a conflict as the uncomfortable collided with the beautiful and the serene. He was upset about his impulse to suppress these thoughts by grabbing his phone, because if he'd been on his phone

¹⁶ Cal Newport, *Digital Minimalism: Choosing a Focused Life in a Noisy World* (New York: Penguin:2019), 8.

¹⁷ Dr Mary Aiken, *The Cyber Effect: A Pioneering Cyberpsychologist Explains How Human Behaviour Changes Online* (London: John Murray Publishers, 2016), 8.

¹⁸ Donna Freitas, *The Happiness Effect: How Social Media is Driving a Generation to Appear Perfect at Any Cost* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 251.

he might never have had the discomfiting thoughts. But then again, if he'd picked up his phone, he would have missed this moment of beauty.¹⁹

This story captures the real struggle of many people in the digital age. This young man was entering a contemplative moment and at the same time feeling the pull on his attention of his device. Notice too the thirst for engaging attentively with a moment of beauty. To be present to beauty is in many ways to be present to God.²⁰ A spiritual director will likely hear this longing and tension in many people. What is at play here is a struggle to be attentive to what the soul most longs for – God.

Digital technologies deal in distraction. They claim one's attention and focus with constant notifications and entertainment.²¹ God is as present as ever yet attentiveness to God's presence is more difficult in the midst of digital noise. Pastor Ken Shigematsu names this reality well:

"It is true that God is with us all the time. He is reaching out to us each day through people in our lives, by creation, and by Scripture. He speaks in moments of beauty, through our memories and desires. Sadly, most of us remain distracted and unaware."²²

Digital technologies feed distraction and work against attentiveness to God. They do this by virtue of demanding our attention but also by shaping our attention spans.²³ It is common to have a sense today that we are "skimming life" and playing in the shallows. Not only is our attentiveness to God impeded but also our attentiveness to our own lives, particularly the time and space we inhabit.

Digital technologies have impacted our relationship with time. John Mark Comer talks about what he calls "Hurry Sickness."²⁴ Comer makes the point that the Western World already has a toxic relationship with time, focussed on busyness and overactivity, however digital technologies have amplified our innate restlessness.

Digital technologies have also impacted our relationship with place. We can be in a sense everywhere and nowhere at the same time. Scott Laurence says: "We have an 'everywhereness' to us now that inevitably alters our relationship to those stalwart human

¹⁹ Freitas, *The Happiness Effect*, XIV. In this book, Freitas had many conversations with college students about social media use.

²⁰ John O Donohue, *Divine Beauty: The Invisible Embrace: Rediscovering the True Sources of Compassion, Serenity, and Hope* (New York: Harper, 2005). John O Donohue makes this wonderful connection between encountering beauty and God in this very beautiful book.

²¹ Miller, Paul E. *A Praying Life: Connecting with God in a Distracting World* (Colorado Spring: The Navigators Press, 2009), Kindle Edition, Location 309.

²² Ken Shigematsu, *Survival Guide for the Soul: How to Flourish Spiritually in a World that Pressures Us to Achieve*. (Grand Rapids MI: Zondervan, 2018), 52.

²³ Carr, *The Shallows*, 37.

²⁴ Jon Mark Comer, *The Ruthless Elimination of Hurry* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2019), 48-51

aspects of self-containment, remoteness and isolation.”²⁵ We can be online and connected to New York or Brisbane while sitting in a park in Timaru yet not present in that place. We can be absent from our own lives even as we live them.²⁶ A prime example of this is the way a person might capture a precious moment with a selfie and post it on Instagram rather than being present to the moment itself.²⁷

The digital age is an age in which our attention is demanded of in unprecedented ways. Because of this the digital world isn’t amenable to contemplation. As Nicholas Carr puts it: “In Google’s world, which is the world we enter when we go online, there’s little place for the pensive stillness of deep reading or the fuzzy indirection of contemplation.”²⁸

Part 2 – Our Relationships

Not only does the digital impact our attentiveness to God, it also influences our human relationships.

Solitude – our relationship with ourselves:

Our relationship with ourselves is important and it is primarily cultivated in the practice of solitude. Richard Foster speaks of “little solitudes that fill our day” such as making a cup of tea alone, rising from bed in the morning and so forth.²⁹ In a world of smartphones are these little solitudes possible any longer or are the gaps filled with scrolling our newsfeed? Even in a moment when one is alone, solitude may not be the experience. As Parker Palmer aptly puts it: “Solitude is not simply physical isolation. It is easy to be alone and yet continue to be in the crowd, to be governed by collective values.”³⁰ How easy it is to be in the crowd via social media. Newport expresses that in our current cultural climate we experience serious solitude deprivation which he defines as: “A state in which you spend close to zero time alone with your own thoughts and free from input from other minds.”³¹ This is an alarming reality of life in a digital age. It raises a question: “If we can’t pay attention to ourselves can we pay attention to others?”³²

²⁵ Scott Laurence, *The Four Dimensional Human: Ways of Being in the Digital World* (London: Random House, 2015), 4.

²⁶ Jon Tyson, *The Burden is Light: Liberating Your Life from the Tyranny of Performance and Success* (New York: Multnomah, 2018), Kindle edition, Location 2245. Tyson says: “We are perpetually pulled away from being present in our lives. Technology has flattened our world in such a way that we have the illusion we can be present everywhere.”

²⁷ Carr, *The Shallows*, 37.

²⁸ Ibid, 173.

²⁹ Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1984), 93.

³⁰ Parker Palmer, *The Active Life: A Spirituality of Work, Creativity and Caring* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1990), 28.

³¹ Newport, *Digital Minimalism*, 103.

³² Turkle, *Reclaiming Conversation*, 10.

Friendship – our relationships with others

The digital age has had an impact on our relationships with one another. It breeds a perceived connection with a lot of people but doesn't foster intimacy, which is essential to friendship.³³ Many people enjoy connecting online but don't feel that it replaces the need for face to face interaction.³⁴ As humans we need intimate and warm relationships. Sherry Turkle's book is about the power of conversation and our need for it. Turkle says: "Conversation is on the path toward the experience of intimacy, community, and communion. Reclaiming conversation is a step toward reclaiming our most fundamental human values."³⁵ Spiritual directors have a powerful role in offering a listening ear and cultivating conversation. Perhaps this genuine conversation is what many in the digital age are seeking most of all when they come to spiritual direction.

Part 3 – Our Soul

The digital age takes its toll on our souls. There is a sense in which the digital depletes so much of our humanity. Newport refers to this as digital exhaustion, saying:

"It's not that any one app or website was particularly bad when considered in isolation. As many people clarified, the issue was the overall impact of having so many different shiny baubles pulling so insistently at their attention and manipulating their mood...the urge to check Twitter or refresh Reddit becomes a nervous twitch that shatters uninterrupted time into shards too small to support the presence necessary for an intentional life."³⁶

The cumulative effect of digital tools leaves so many feeling without aim and cast adrift in a sea of pixels. Spiritual direction is, as I have defined, about paying attention, about being intentional about our souls, and our spiritual growth.

One of the most interesting aspects of our busy digital world is that it hinders creativity. You would think that with all the content online and so much access to information our creativity would blossom. But according to research, deep creativity requires a certain amount of boredom and downtime for our brains.³⁷ Not only this, but there is a sense in which aspects of our lives are manipulated by technologies such as social media. Companies spend a lot of time working out how to make money through these

³³ Ibid, 7.

³⁴ Ibid, 190. "At its best, social media functions as a tool for navigating one's relationships. It is not a replacement for those relationships...they don't want social media to go away, but they really don't want the real world of face-to-face interactions to go away."

³⁵ Ibid, 7.

³⁶ Cal Newport, *Digital Minimalism*, X, XI.

³⁷ Turkle, *Reclaiming Conversation*, 76. "Writing about his own experience, the French mathematician and philosopher Henri Poincare explored the slow unfolding of what seem like 'lightbulb' ideas. 'Sudden illumination' says Poincare, is only a 'manifest sign of long, unconscious prior work', usually done alone."

platforms. In a recent book, computer scientist Jarod Lanier points out social media can manipulate our mood, our spending habits, and even how we vote.³⁸ The point is that technology engages us at the centre of our lives, at a soul level, and its effect is often deformative.³⁹

Engaging the Digital Age

This paper has made the case that digital technology is not neutral. In fact, it shapes our worldview, our habits, and our lives in so many ways. If spiritual direction is about cultivating attentiveness, directors today would be wise to consider that they are doing so in a world full of “attention merchants.”⁴⁰ This conclusion will offer very brief bullet points of ideas and practices that spiritual directors could explore in working in the digital age.

Practical tips:

-Help your directee develop their own philosophy for engaging with technology. It’s important to be intentional about the technology we use, and a director could help the directee ask: “How is this technology I use forming my spirituality?”⁴¹ “How is the technology I use disrupting prayer?” “What deep needs is technology meeting in my life?”

-Help your directee undertake a digital declutter. It could flow out of the above questions. A good question for a director to ask may be, “is there an app/website/platform you could let go of that would free you up to be more attentive to God?”

-You could encourage a directee to embrace a digital Sabbath.⁴² The idea of this is to put aside all digital devices for 24 hours.

-Contemplative practices are a wonderful antidote to a distracted and inattentive age. Any kind of contemplative prayer that stills the mind (and the thumbs!) is a good idea for people in the digital age. I love R J Snell’s definition of contemplation: “Contemplation is not a

³⁸ Jarod Lanier, *Ten Arguments for Deleting Your Social Media Accounts Right Now* (London: Penguin, 2018).

³⁹ I use soul in the parlance of ancient Jewish thought, summarized well by the Bible Project - <https://thebibleproject.simplecast.com/episodes/0b7f0750-1c06eb86>

⁴⁰ Tim Wu, *The Attention Merchants: From the Daily Newspaper to Social Media, How our Time and Attention is Harvested and Sold* (London: Atlantic Books, 2017), 20. Wu uses this phrase “attention merchants” to describe an entire industry. Wu wisely says: “If we think of our attention as a resource, or even a kind of currency, we must allow that it is always, necessarily, being ‘spent.’ There is no saving it for later. The question is always, what shall I pay attention to?”

⁴¹ Newport, *Digital Minimalism*, 3.

⁴² Walter Brueggemann, *Sabbath as Resistance: Saying No to the Culture of Now* (Louisville Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014), Kindle Edition, Loc 76. “On the Sabbath, the practical benefits of technology are laid aside, and one tries to stand in the cycle of natural time, without manipulation or interference.”

passive indifference, not a stilling or cessation of activity, but a theoretical activity of particular intensity – a determined reaching out to the world in ‘expectant alertness.’”⁴³

-Embrace disillusionment. Let your directee express their disappointment and angst with the digital age they live in. It’s helpful to name the false realities and promises of the digital age in order to be formed in fresh ways.⁴⁴

-Offer “real presence.” The need for real connection and conversation in person is so tangible in a digital age. Pastor and theologian Jay Kim says that genuine empathy and connection requires the “patience, depth, and the risk of stepping into real community with real people and their real lives in real time and in real space.”⁴⁵

There are many more suggestions that could be made, but the point is that a lot of the bread and butter of spiritual direction – listening, attentiveness to the Holy Spirit, a contemplative stance, genuine presence, all of these are particularly helpful in the digital age that we live in. There is in fact a unique opportunity for the resurgence of the contemplative in this time. Jonathan Taplin speaks of his experience taking time out at a Benedictine monastery: “I am not a Catholic, yet I find the monk’s prescriptions to be helpful, a model of how I want to live in the world. The idea of an examined life is missing in our current digital rush.”⁴⁶ There is an invitation for spiritual directors in this moment to be people who cultivate a contemplative counterculture which functions as a precious and life-giving antidote to the detrimental effects of digital technology in our lives.

⁴³ R. J. Snell, *Acedia and Its Discontents: Metaphysical Boredom in an Empire of Desire* (Kettering, OH: Angelico Press, 2015), 98.

⁴⁴ Palmer, *The Active Life*, 16.

⁴⁵ Jay Y. Kim, *Analog Church: Why We Need Real People, Places, and Things in the Digital Age*. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2020), Loc 284.

⁴⁶ Taplin, *Move Fast and Break Things*, 226.

A Prayer for a distracted digital age:

by Joshua Taylor

When your gaze feels dim,
your soul diminished
and your wandering thoughts homeless.

When your friends aren't
who they seemed to be
and when disquiet haunts you.

When the blue light offers up
its incandescent promises
only to disappoint.

May Christ come to you
sparkling with presence.
May your soul come home
to a meal at His table.
May you rub sleep from your eyes
and see as if for the first time.

Amen.

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