

## Serenity, Social Engagement, and Social Media

Rev. Dr. Roger Jones, preaching

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Unitarian Universalist Society of Sacramento

Reading: “The Sound of the Genuine,” by Howard Thurman

The Reverend Dr. Howard Thurman lived from 1899 to 1981. In 1953, he became the dean of the Marsh Chapel at Boston University, a Methodist institution. He served on the faculty and as campus chaplain for 12 years—the first African American minister to be appointed to such a role in a dominant-white university. While at Boston University, he was a mentor to Martin Luther King Junior, a young doctoral student. Thurman taught King and other students about Mohandas Gandhi’s theories of nonviolence as a way of life and as a political strategy; Thurman had met with Gandhi in the British colony of India in the 1930s. The words of Howard Thurman:

There is something in every one of you that waits, listens for the genuine in yourself—and if you cannot hear it, you will never find whatever it is for which you are searching. And if you hear it and then do not follow it, it was better that you had never been born.

You are the only *you* that has ever lived; your idiom is the only idiom of its kind in all the existences, and if you cannot hear the sound of the genuine in you, you will all of your life spend your days on the ends of strings that somebody else pulls.

There is in you something that waits/ and listens for the sound of the genuine in yourself. [Yet] sometimes there is so much traffic going on in your minds, so many different kinds of signals, so many vast impulses floating through your organism that go back thousands of generations long before you were even a thought in the mind of creation, and you are buffeted by these. And in the midst of all of this, you have got to find out what your name is. Who are you? How does the sound of the genuine come through to you? . . . .

The sound of the genuine is flowing through you.

### Sermon

Our Soul Matters theme for this month of January is Living with Intention. Today I want to explore the intentions that we might bring to our engagement with social media platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube.

You may feel that you have a healthy relationship with social media, or with other people *on* social media. I like to think so, myself. Or you may be someone who has never have signed up for Facebook, logged in to YouTube, or tweeted, or read a tweet. In any event, it’s important for us to learn how social media operates and what its critics have to say about it, including some engineers and computer scientists who now feel guilty for what they created.

Facebook is the most heavily used platform, and it spans the globe. In the year 2020, it generated 29 billion dollars of net income. That represents a 58% increase in profits over the year before.<sup>1</sup> To my knowledge, none of us has paid any dues or subscription fees to Facebook or to Instagram, which Facebook owns. Likewise, we probably haven’t paid so that we can watch YouTube or use the Google search engine, which also generate big profits. The reason we haven’t paid to use those platforms is that we are not their customers. We are their *products*.

We are what gets *delivered* to their customers—our attention, our time, our emotions, our personal information. Some of those customers are like old fashioned advertisers—selling soap or cereal, cars, clothing, and so on. But many of those customers are unknown to us, and often unknown to the platforms which take their money in order to shape our attitudes, our passions, our spending, and our voting. Some of the customers are information warfare campaigns which sway elections around the world, recruit people into terrorist organizations and hate groups, spread false information about climate change, and give life to conspiracy theories which cause people to get sick or die.<sup>ii</sup> (21)

It is the method of social media platforms to use computer algorithms; it is their business plan. An algorithm is a set of rules in a computer program. Jaron Lanier says: “Algorithms [are set up to] gorge on data about you, every second. [For example:] What kinds of links do you click on? What videos do you watch all the way through? How quickly are you moving from one thing to the next? Where are you when you do these things? Who are you connecting with...? What facial expressions do you make? ... What were you doing just before you decided to buy something, or not?” “All these measurements [of us] have been matched up with similar [measurements] about the lives of multitudes of other people.” (6)

Social media is addictive—on purpose. Not only do algorithms count our clicks and our page views—they use our habits to keep us involved. They feed us more of what we have shown interest in, more of what we believe in, more of what we like. And paradoxically, they feed us more of what makes us feel insecure. Social media algorithms prey upon what is called the Fear of Missing Out. For example, if other people seem busier, happier, cooler, more successful, or more attractive, it generates anxiety. You would think that if something brought down our self-esteem, we’d get away from it, but anxiety about missing out can also keep us engaged. The algorithms make sure that your “unhappiness will be tailored to you.” (89)

Another paradox is that social media platforms learn what ticks us off. And they find more of it to show us. The algorithms know that negative emotions like outrage and anger keep us hooked more than positive or neutral emotions. The shady customers of social media platforms use negative emotions to manipulate us. We are the products delivered to those customers.

In the words of Jaron Lanier, “social media is biased, not to the Left or the Right, but *downward*.” (21) There is an incentive built-in for us to be more inflammatory online. If you generate more outrage, you bring more attention to yourself. It doesn’t win you friends who care about you as a person, but it might win you fans who want to join your wolf pack. Rather than leading us to be a lone wolf—an individual, an original—social media drives us to look for our pack. Lanier explains his image this way: A lone wolf is at risk of getting mauled by a pack, so the incentive is to join a pack and find someone else to attack. (134) Yet all this anxiety generates more isolation for everyone concerned.

The effect of the business model for social media is anti-social.

Jaron Lanier’s book is entitled *Ten Arguments for Deleting Your Social Media Accounts--Right Now*. Lanier is a computer scientist who has been in Silicon Valley since the 1980s. He’s a co-founder of the technology called virtual reality. He’s not against the internet itself. We could still benefit from all the ways the internet has facilitated research and connected people for support, friendship, and the exchange of information. However, we could do those things without having turned over our freedom, serenity, and civility to invisible systems.

He takes pains to say there are lovely people working for social media firms—real people, who don't really want to ruin our lives or the planet. Yet they are caught up in a business model which is as profitable as it is harmful. Their business model depends on “pervasive surveillance and constant [and] subtle manipulation” of the behaviors of all of us who participate in social media.

Lanier says that social media is making us unhappy, it is destroying our capacity for empathy for the experience of others and robbing the capacity of other people to have empathy for our own experiences. And it is turning us into jerks [assholes]. He uses a two-syllable word, but I'll say jerks. Of course, he says, there were jerks in the world before social media, but it was easier to avoid being one. (55) Lanier writes: “If, when you participate in online platforms, you notice a nasty thing inside yourself, an insecurity, a sense of low self-esteem, [if you feel] a yearning to lash out, to swat someone down, [if you do,] then *leave that platform*. Simple.” Last week I was reading comments posted online on a neighborhood-based platform called NextDoor.com. A neighbor I don't know replied to another neighbor I don't know by making a statement about Covid-19 vaccinations that was untrue and extreme. I wanted to weigh in. I wanted to save the day--and swat them down. I wanted to say something snide and show my outrage. In the past, I might have. Instead, I deleted the post and got back to work. My serenity was rescued from the jaws of temptation, just in time.

Social media platforms are filled with artificial people, called *bots*. A bot is a robotic program. Not even counting the voices of Siri or Alexa in our devices, we have all interacted with artificial people online. For example, Lanier says, “You decided to buy something because it had a lot of good reviews, but many of those reviews were from artificial people. You found a doctor using a search engine [such as Google], but the reason that doctor showed up high in the search results was that a load of fake people linked to their office. You looked at a story or watched a video because so many other people had, but most of them were fake. [On Twitter,] you became aware of tweets because they were retweeted first by armies of bots.” (60) Shady outfits make money generating fake followers. In 2018, for example, the going rate was only \$225 to generate the first 25,000 Twitter followers who were not real people. (60)

The most extreme conspiracy theories often start out in social media. There they get amplified by artificial people, before they appear on broadcast or cable news channels, especially extremely partisan channels. [In this way,] repetition [of a lie] can create an environment in which what was once “unthinkable [becomes] thinkable.” (68)

Our theme this month is living with intention. Yet good intentions alone are no match for addictive computer programs which capture the time and attention of billions of people. Our government has to regulate social media companies. These firms have to be subject to independent oversight. These companies won't fix themselves.<sup>iii</sup> Rarely has a business monopoly done so. Facebook and others may speak of their good intentions and say they are changing course, but they don't. That's because the harm is the result of their business model. Many of their loudest critics know what they're talking about--because they used to work there.

In 2017, Chamath Palihapitiya, a former vice president of user growth at Facebook, said an unintended consequence of its business plan is the destruction of cooperation among people, and a destruction of civility. But these are what a society needs to function! As a former executive, he expressed feelings of guilt for his participation. He offered no policy

recommendation to protect society. But his personal solution was to stop using social media tools, years ago. (9)

You may not be ready to delete your social media accounts, even at the urging of computer scientists. You may feel no desire to. It could be that a social media platform is the only place you can see a particular group of people or participate in a club you belong to. Or maybe you feel stuck in what they call the *network effect*; this means you depend on a platform you don't feel very good about, just because everyone else is using it. Perhaps you depend on a social media platform for your business or for other professional reasons.

Wherever we find ourselves, whether online or unplugged, it is worth reflecting on our intentions and our choices for the ways we spend the moments of our lives. It's worth considering who has our attention, or *what* has our attention, and how little we know about *how much it knows...about us*.

In the reading we heard earlier, the late Rev. Dr. Howard Thurman urges: "Listen for the sound of the genuine in yourself." He says: "If you cannot hear the sound of the genuine in you, you will all of your life spend your days on the ends of strings that somebody else pulls."

If any sort of technology, any kind, occupies *hours* of our day, every day, it might be useful to examine our experience of using it. We might think about how it shapes our behavior, affects our mood, and shows up in our close relationships. We might consider taking a break, actually making a ritual of unplugging on a regular basis. The writer Casper Ter Kuile recommends a tech sabbath, for example. He takes a sabbath himself—from sundown every Friday till sundown on Saturday, he doesn't use any phone or computer device.<sup>iv</sup> Of course, if we do unplug, we want to be intentional about how we will use the time it frees up for us.

A good friend of mine has worked in the computer and internet field for a number of years. He has two sons who are young adults. I asked him about the criticism I had been reading about social media. He didn't address that but spoke about his own decision to keep a distance for the sake of his serenity. He said, "I have found that since I have been off of Facebook, my life feels more manageable. When I do open Instagram, I ask myself, is there something else that I could be doing to bring *more joy* into my life? The answer is almost always yes. Sometimes I call my grandma then, or I text one of the boys, to reach out directly instead of passively."

Wherever we find ourselves, it's worth getting clear about our intentions for the ways we spend the moments of our lives. It is worth giving our lives at least as much time and attention as we give to things that will take all the hours which they can get from us. It is worth pausing to listen for the sound of the genuine which flows through us. It flows through you and me and everyone. The sound of the genuine. May we listen for it, and be renewed. So may it be. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> "How Facebook Forced a Reckoning by Shutting Down the Team That Put People Ahead of Profits," by Billy Perrigo, *Time*, Oct 25/Nov. 1, 2021, p. 30. <https://time.com/6104899/facebook-reckoning-frances-haugen/>

<sup>ii</sup> Jaron Lanier, *Ten Arguments for Deleting Your Social Media Accounts Right Now* (New York, 2018: Picador), p. 21. All parenthetical page citations in the sermon refer to this book. See articles and video clips on his website: <http://www.jaronlanier.com/>

<sup>iii</sup> Roger McNamee, "Viewpoint: Facebook Will Not Fix Itself," *Time*, Oct 25/Nov. 1, 2021, p. 33. <https://time.com/6104863/facebook-regulation-roger-mcnamee/>

<sup>iv</sup> Casper Ter Kuile, *The Power of Ritual* (New York, 2020: HarperCollins), p. 64-71.