

When Connectivity Disconnects by Jon Gauger

Face it. America has become a nation of fiddlers. Seems like we click, mouse, or scroll nearly every waking minute of the day.

Now I readily confess to being something of an e-mail junkie. Which deep down inside may be the real reason I've fought off buying a Smartphone or iPhone. You see, it's my own one-man-research-firm observation that people who own devices that are essentially always on line...are always on line! Said another way, to own a Blackberry is to be owned by one. You, apparently, are no longer able to allow a—quote—idle moment.

As I write this commentary on board a commuter train, I've observed the lady next to me flailing her arms, much like someone ensconced in a knitting project. I've seen knitting on the train so that's what I expected to find when I turned my head for a better look. Nope. She was texting or typing something to someone somewhere. Next to her sits a well tailored businessman who has so far been unable to stop pushing the buttons on his Blackberry. Not even for a moment.

Now don't misunderstand me. I'm not anti-technology. I have two computers and four flat panel monitors in my office—not to mention the tech fare at home. Of course I carry a cell phone. Of course I understand the value of texting and push mail and running cool apps on your iPhone. (Parenthetically, the woman on my left just whipped out her Blackberry and is now tapping away).

My comment—and maybe complaint—is this: How have we arrived at the place where as a culture, downtime or quiet time or disconnect time is so little valued as to be considered wasted time? What makes us think that we can live enriched and healthy lives without being willing to regularly just look out the window...instead of “doing Windows?” Why is that the mere ownership of technology that lets us—quote—stay in touch—almost dictates that we fiddle with our phones? Again, I'm not suggesting there's no value in these devices. I'm questioning something much bigger: our values.

Anecdotally, I can honestly say I've never met someone who started using a Blackberry that used it “just a little bit.” They're constantly pecking away, constantly reading or replying to an email. It's the “constant clicking”—in my opinion—that's the problem, not the availability of the technology. Somehow, having gained the capability for more connectedness, we've lost the ability to disconnect. Ironically, WI-FI often means bye-bye to deeper relationships with the very people that share space in our homes: spouses, brothers, sisters, children.

I think a case could be made that Andy Griffith's Mayberry had something Blackberry's can never give us: the warmth of a hand shake. A steady gaze into the eyes of a loved one. Funny how “connectivity” can ultimately leave us so disconnected. Maybe “always on line” is actually *out* of line. Perhaps the smartest way to use a Smartphone...is *less*.

Staying moderately connected in a madly connected world, I'm Jon Gauger for PTA.