

Conservation Montgomery

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Finding our Voice

Perspectives from the CM Board of Directors

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Madsen, with her low-tech, c. 1920 Royal typewriter

Dedicated to the Memory of Steve Jobs

Love Technology, But Keep It Human

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Conservation Montgomery Board of Directors

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I love technology. When I say it, sometimes I get looks of bewilderment from colleagues or friends. Maybe the looks are related to my vocal way of fumbling with new software or my latest gadget.

But think of the beauty of technology and how it's changed the world. It allows us to launch satellites that collect vast amounts of data around the planet. We forecast weather with technology. We use it to solve crimes. We crunch numbers with it on election nights and determine by midnight who we have elected as our leaders. Technology brings a surgeon into the depths of a patient's heart and assists in a delicate surgical procedure. Or it can allow a surgeon to reach into the womb and operate on an infant in utero. Fascinating.

Technology allows us to monitor watersheds, sample soil quality and observe the depths of the oceans. It allows us to Skype or videoconference. At its best, technology can help us keep cars off the roads by allowing us to shop online. It can help us telework and save hours spent in transit.

So what's not to love? Hmm...How about the occasional failure of technology and the time we spend trying to recover when it fails. Worse yet, I'm not sure if many of us are using technology to save time and smooth out the rough edges in life.

Consider that in the late '80s, a *Time* magazine cover article noted how advances in technology were supposed to save Americans time. The writers discussed W. Edward Deming's vision of technology and how the Japanese were using technology to improve not just productivity but their quality of life. But here in the Western hemisphere, we managed to mess up. Instead of using technology to shorten our work weeks and work load, we started using it to crank out more work and work longer hours. Obviously, something somewhere backfired. And this was before so many of us had laptops and before cell phones were commonplace.

Fast-forward to 2007 when Kelton Research told us in *Information Week* that 65% of Americans in a study said they were spending more time on their computers than they were spending with their significant others. This was just three years after Facebook was launched. Now a Pew Internet survey shows that two-thirds, or 65%, of adults online are using social networking sites, a figure that has more than doubled in the past three years.

When I find myself Facebooking with our neighbor across the street, I worry. When I see two teenage girls sitting in a restaurant using their cell phones or texting to relate to other people instead of enjoying face-to-face

interaction with each other, I worry. And when my family starts begging me to spend time with them instead of the computer, you get it... I worry.

Rather than worry, I'd like to do better about unplugging and managing my addiction to technology. And I'd like to challenge fellow county residents to try the following. As we head into fall and then winter months of cabin fever when screen time usually increases for most of us, perhaps a few of these strategies will keep us all more human:

- Get out of your office at least once a day. Go out and actually eat lunch somewhere besides at your desk. Speak to people on the way to get lunch. Yes, I said it: *Look at people and speak to them*. Leave your cell phone or your Blackberry in your pocket. Better yet, turn it off for an hour.
- Try a "no e-mail Friday" as some companies have started doing. After the initial shock of it, see if it improves productivity and morale in your office. Walk around more at work. Try not to use e-mail to touch base on every aspect of every project. A discussion and face-time with colleagues is often more efficient than sending a continuous thread of e-mail back and forth.
- On the weekend, go for a 20 or 30-minute walk every day. Get on your bike. Enjoy a fall hike at one of our 400+ parks. Or come out and join Conservation Montgomery on a Community Stroll. Help us plant trees on Nov. 5th. Or volunteer during Community Service Week Oct. 15-22nd. Leave the iPad at home when you are out and about. You cannot type and walk, pedal a bike, or put a shovel into the ground at the same time.
- Take a vacation without packing your Blackberry, iPad or laptop. I know. It's a scary thought, but give it a go.
- Set a limit on the amount of time you'll spend on the computer each weekend or each evening at home. Then stick to it. Give that time that you're not on the computer back to your family.
- Spend an evening out with your better half, with no Blackberry, no iPad and no screen time of any sort involved. Hug each other. Hug your dog. Have you ever tried hugging a computer monitor or your iPad? I admit that I've hugged my iPad. It's a poor substitute for the real deal.
- When you do use technology, look at ways to make it actually save you time and make you less sedentary. For example, we pay our bills online at our house. I used to spend hours writing checks and putting bills in the envelopes, and so on. That's history. I used to run a lot more errands than I do now. But now quick online shopping spares me the agony of entering a mall.
- Are you struggling with computer issues at home? If you can afford a professional IT consultant at home, go for it. It's a good way to save hours of frustration and hit-and-miss in front of your screen. Make a list of all of your home computer issues. Then have a good technician walk you through answers to the problems with your home computer system. Having a computer system that runs efficiently can result in less screen time.

These are just a few ways to put technology back on your terms instead of letting the technological revolution make you crazy or worse yet, isolated from your community. Yes, I do love technology. I am in awe of it. I am inspired by it. But I'm looking for ways to keep it human at the same time. Join me this fall and eliminate some screen time. Get outdoors -- unplug -- and renew your relationship with nature and our community.

Madsen chairs the Board of Directors of Conservation Montgomery.

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The views of a particular Board Member of Conservation Montgomery may not reflect the views of each Board member or their respective organizations on every topic covered in the *Finding our Voice* op/eds.

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