

Get Off the Phone! How The Smart Phone Is Making Us Dumber

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Apparently I'm one of the few people on our planet still using a Blackberry phone. I joke with our IT department staff: "I refuse to convert over to the Apple iPhone because Apple and Alphabet Inc. are taking over the world", I tell them. I have a stubborn pride that I'm of the last remaining rebels refusing to give in to these two monopolies. Not having all the special applications and fancy gadgets on these latest Apple phones is something I don't miss. You can't miss something you've never experienced right? Actually, I'm a little afraid I'll become addicted to a really smart phone and, as a result, become just a little dumber.

I had come to a halt at the stop sign of four-way intersection when I heard a quick screech of tires, and then felt a big boom! In slow motion, it seemed, my SUV was violently shoved from behind by another vehicle that had plowed right into me. Apparently the college coed driver, and her passenger girlfriend, were completely unaware that anything was in their direct path. They had been totally distracted on an Apple iPhone app when they hit me. No one died, but the impact totaled their car, and it shook me up pretty good. Someone's smart phone almost killed me.

How many times have you been to a restaurant, looked over at the other table, and the whole family is on their phones and not talking, or even looking at each other through most of the dinner? A lot I'll bet. Our phones are hurting our human relationships as well.

Gabriel Marcel writing more than 50 years ago: "In our contemporary world it may be said that the more a man becomes dependent on the gadgets whose smooth functioning assures him a tolerable life at the material level, the more estranged he becomes from an awareness of his inner reality." Of course he was talking about the radio but it applies even more so to our latest technology – that thing in our hand right now. It's sucking out your brain and you know it.

I lived my early childhood years, and then later my college years, in the city of Boston. I once knew my way around "Bean Town" fairly well, but if you've ever been there you know a really deranged person designed the traffic system. Numerous circle roundabouts, water inlets everywhere, and underground highways make it the most confusing city in the world to navigate in a car. Most visitors will use the iPhone Siri, or another GPS to assist them. I refused on a recent visit to the city I left almost forty years ago, accompanied by my girlfriend. That took a lot of courage. We all know the highest rate of relationship failure is caused by couples arguing over directions.

I refused to use the directional technology because I'm also convinced that if I never again use my inbred and learned sense of direction, that part of my brain is probably going to atrophy. Think about it. When I find my way to a Boston destination using my own brain, and the vague memory bank of my youth, I'm sharpening the very human skills that helped me hunt for food and get back to my hut once upon a time. However, I must confess, it took several wrong turns, a lot of tense interchanges with my frustrated riding partner, and almost one additional hour to reach my intended destination. Here is where the other benefit of having only a dumb phone comes in to play. With the added stress of being totally lost, we both had to talk and work through it, thus sharpening my guy language skills. That would not have happened with the navigational God Siri telling me exactly where to go.

I also think it's sad that our kids seem to be addicted to their smart phones. To our youth those blinking red dots are a signal that you're wanted and belong. When it doesn't blink enough some kids panic and suffer social anxiety. They take them to bed. It's the new teddy bear. The last interchange they probably have each night is with this electronic gadget, and it is the first thing they reach for when they wake up. Our kids seem to need constant connection and feedback – a permanent social vibe if you will. It's like they don't want to be left alone.....ever!

We need to be careful and mindful of how the smart phone, and our other technologies, could be making us less human, dependent, and maybe just a little dumber. While there is much to love about the device, they should come with a warning label: "THIS SMART PHONE MAY BE HAZARDOUS TO YOUR HEALTH, AND ESPECIALLY YOUR BRAIN".