

## Our digital Stockholm Syndrome

America is talking more than ever before, but seemingly enjoying it less. The Coronavirus is to blame (or thank) for this, but so is technology. Now that we have been forcibly sequestered in our homes we are reaching out, digitally, to talk with one another at an astounding rate. This is not to say that what we are saying is of any new Earth-shattering importance or relevance, it is just a comment on the fact that we are speaking to each other like never before.

We send or receive about six calls per day per person and we participate in 11 million video-conferences and send or receive 130 billion emails, daily. Add to that our 6 billion SMS messages/texts and Facebook posts (350 million photos/day), Tweets (500 million/day). That's an amazing figure, but it doesn't include all the blog posts that are uploaded or comments made on the 1.5 billion websites in existence. Judging by those numbers, it would seem that we aren't doing anything BUT communicating with one another!

Under normal circumstances, this would be regarded as something positive, a sign that Americans are adopting and using technology to our mutual advantage. Unfortunately, during these über polarized political times when everybody is at each other's throats, I believe that it is actually contributing to widening the gap between us. AND, ladies and gentlemen, we haven't even entered the home stretch of the 2020 Presidential campaign yet when the airwaves and Internet will be full of advertising that will generate even more back and forth communication!

All this jabbering has made us a veritable tower of babbling and hasn't brought us one millimeter or nanosecond closer to any semblance of amity. At any given moment, Americans are sitting in front of their computer monitors or cradling their cellphones as if they were newborns, searching, desperately searching, for a new message in response to one of their old messages. I know of which I speak, because up until recently I, too, was a willing prisoner of the keyboard and suffered under our new age's *digital Stockholm Syndrome*. (You may remember that in 1973 a bank robbery in Stockholm, Sweden resulted in hostage-taking at a local bank, and after a while the hostages began to bond with their captors and began to regard them as their protectors instead of abusers.) A similar case can be made for ourselves and our 'machines.'

Then I remembered something important...I could turn off my computer and phone and actually open up my door and walk outside and grab some sunlight and fresh air. I could even go for a hike in the woods and leave technology and my stupid surgical mask behind me. What a liberating feeling! Fortunately for me, the woods are right outside my back door and they stretch on for miles. In the 16 years I've lived here I've only encountered other people on the trails five times, meaning that it's peaceful there and offers up only the sounds of birds and the wind through the trees - nothing artificial or man-made to get in the way of my wandering thoughts.

The great American philosopher Henry David Thoreau spent two years in a cabin he built himself on land owned by his friend Ralph Waldo Emerson on Walden Pond near Concord, Massachusetts which was located a few miles from his parents' home. During that time, Thoreau explored his innermost thoughts by sequestering himself (I would say opening himself up) in the bosom of Nature. By living alone and embracing his natural surroundings he discovered things about himself that were hidden from view while living cheek by jowl with other people. Thoreau only had two chairs in his cabin, and when asked by his friends, "Why only two?", he replied, "Because a man should only focus on one man at a time" or words to that effect.

This is in stark contrast to our modern world where it seems that we're constantly seeking out other people to share our comments and opinions with, much of the time looking for agreement or praise. I'm guilty of that sin, too and so, I suspect, is anyone that thinks they have something special to offer in the way of wisdom or insight. Be that as it may, Thoreau came out of that Walden Pond solitary experience a different man and wrote of his two years in a classic book, "Walden: Life in the woods" which was published on August 9, 1854.

At the outset of his experiment he wrote, "I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived."

Two thousand copies of "Walden: Life in the woods" were printed and they sold for \$1 apiece. No good deed, and in this case, a fantastic book, goes unpunished, however. In the 1870s and 80s he was accused of being an irresponsible crank, but in the 1890s a group of people whose lives had been forever changed by his book began to promote him. As luck would have it - as with many artists - his work gained in popularity after his death. In 1941, the Thoreau Society was formed and is now a repository for his writings and books written about him. By the way, if you'd like to purchase a first edition and first printing of the book, you can pick one up for only \$25,000. (If you're interested in learning more about the society, log on [www.thoreausociety.org](http://www.thoreausociety.org))

That brings me back to our new stay-at-home existence. The Coronavirus, while sadly taking the lives of hundreds of thousands of people has also offered us a unique opportunity to dial back our dependence on technology, take a deep breath and regard not only the immediate world close to home but do a deep dive into the world within ourselves. If we're smart, we will unplug our devices and begin a similar journey to Thoreau's. Walden Pond can be anywhere we choose.

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