

“BEING REAL VIRTUALLY”
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Call to Gather

“There is no enlightenment outside of daily life.”
—Thich Nhat Hanh¹

Reading: from Bettina Vitell’s cookbook *A Taste of Heaven*
The kitchen is a place that sharpens us. It’s a place that wakes us up. Our sense of smell becomes keener. We taste with greater subtlety. We see with more clarity and our movements become quick and sure.

But there are times when we are not as sensitive, not as focused. We are distracted and nothing seems to go right. In the kitchen the results are easy to notice. The sauce burns, the bread doesn’t rise, and dishes slip out of our hands.

Cooking requires that we be fully present. This is one of its greatest teachings. It keeps bringing us back to what is happening in the moment and continually calls our attention to what we are doing.

We smell when the cake is ready to come out of the oven and we taste when the soup is almost done to perfection. When the water boils on the stove, we turn down the heat.

Through cooking we can become more responsive to what is happening around us. In the very same way that the Chinese cook was able to sharpen his knives just by using them, we can sharpen our lives by living them with awareness, moment by moment.²

Sermon

From time to time, I ask myself: What’s the hardest part of my job right now? Well, right now it’s not doing memorial services. It’s also not weddings (which, by the way, are typically more challenging than memorial services). It’s not comforting people who are grieving, dying, or suffering from illness or some other significant distress. It’s not writing sermons or coming up with sermon topics. It’s not fund-raising, even in a down economy. It’s not supervising staff or working with volunteers. It’s not administration.

You know what the hardest part of my job is right now? It’s e-mail. I am drowning in e-mail. Drowning is the best metaphor I have to describe this problem. Hour after hour, day after day, the e-mail messages keep seeping out of my computer into my office. Friday was a typical day, maybe even a little less than average. Even with a good spam filter in place, I received fourteen e-mails between when I left work on

¹ http://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/9074.Thich_Nhat_Hanh.

² Frederic and Mary Ann Brussat, eds., *Spiritual Literacy* (New York: Scribner, 1996), p. 219.

Thursday evening and when I turned on the computer Friday morning. Then I received five more during my first hour at work, five more during my second hour, and four during my third. So to stay even, I'd have to have worked through twenty-eight e-mails in three hours of work. This is how e-mail works: the messages just keep relentlessly seeping out of the computer. Most of the time it feels like I'm up to my neck in e-mail, gasping for air.

What a change this is from when I started here nineteen years ago. At that time, e-mail was not even on my radar. Sure, e-mail started in the 1960s, but it wasn't massively available until into the 1990s. I don't think I got my first AOL account until 1993 or so. And at first, the messages came in at a slow trickle. Only gradually did the volume become a challenge.

I'm mindful that e-mail will not always be a problem for me in this position, primarily because of two reasons. First, I envision that one day, this position will have a dedicated office assistant. This clearly isn't at the top of the list of additional paid positions we should add. But if we keep growing, we will need to do this at some point in the not-too-distant future. And then this person will triage my e-mail so that I see only those messages which truly require my attention. The second reason e-mail is short-term problem is the fact that it will sooner than later become obsolete. It will be replaced by a new technology. Already, many teens and young adults don't use e-mail unless they're in college and have to because their professors insist on it. Just a few years ago we relied on e-mail to keep in touch with the members of our youth group here; now we know that many of our messages go unread. Instead, we need to use text messaging and Facebook.

I also am mindful that there could be a lot worse things than e-mail to be struggling with. The fact that it's number one is an indicator of how blessed I am in this ministry. And I should add that in many ways, I am thankful for e-mail. It has been a very helpful tool for getting updates from you about concerns in your lives, and I enjoy the e-mail responses I get after some sermons. Also, e-mail has lessened the evening phone calls I need to make. In my early years here, I often devoted a chunk of the rare evenings I wasn't working here to calling Fellowship people whom I couldn't easily reach during the day. And because of e-mail, I have less phone interruptions during the day.³

But still, e-mail is a challenge. And I'm drawn in my preaching to address the challenges I'm facing—especially when I have a sense that many of you may be facing them, too. E-mail is but one aspect of the much larger challenge of how we navigate through a whole new world of communication possibilities. The internet, e-mail, Facebook, My Space, Twitter, text messaging, smart phones: there are so many ways to keep in touch with each other. All of us have to make decisions about what we will and will not use—even the self-proclaimed Luddite who won't use any of it has made a decision. And underlying all of the decisions we make about this new world of communication is a spiritual question: How do we want to connect with our fellow human beings? Last month, Dottie explored this issue with a special focus on Facebook and other social networking media. I'm going to pick up the baton and continue the conversation, this time with an emphasis on e-mail.

³ The Rev. Dottie Mathews shared this latter positive impact of e-mail during a conversation after the weekend's first sermon.

I should share an assumption underlying my message today: I am assuming that there is not one right and moral way to navigate through these decisions of how we want to communicate with others. I see relatively few moral absolutes other than it's wrong to use the internet and its variants to exploit other people or to commit crimes. But beyond these few moral absolutes, I think we each have to figure out what will work best for us at this particular point in our lives.

Just this past week I had a glimpse of this truth. I was at a planning meeting for a continuing education institute our UU Ministers Association plans to offer in a year. Someone suggested that we should strive to make the institute retreat-like and should therefore encourage participants to leave their laptops at home and turn off their smart phones. Many of us—including me—jumped on the self-righteous bandwagon, condemning those among us who seem unwilling to turn their gadgets off. I felt my judgmental hackles rising. This seemed like the perfect opportunity for us to guide our wayward, technology-crazed colleagues to a better, more righteous place. Then one person who is very dedicated to our UU Association and serves in multiple ways said, “You know, the only way I can do all of the denominational stuff I do is to keep in touch with my church by cell phone and e-mail. Take away these connections, and I won't be able to do half the stuff I do to help our association.” It was a slap in my judgmental face, and helped me realize that for me, it's a good thing to disconnect from e-mail and voicemail at a continuing education seminar. But this might not be a good thing for someone else. The truth is: each of us has choices to make as we make decisions about how we wish to use communication technology. Today I'll share about my decisions—not in an instructional or prescriptive way, but as a way to help you think more deeply about the decisions you are making.

In the decisions I make about what communication technologies to use and how to use them, I am guided principally by three questions: 1) What is my purpose in using a particular technology? 2) How can I be real and authentic as I use the technology? And 3) How can I use the technology skillfully? Here I am evoking the idea of “skillful means” in Buddhism—that is, the effort to do things well, with intentionality and mindfulness. Contemplating these three questions helps me be thoughtful and intentional in my use of communication technology. I will apply these three questions to Facebook and, in more detail, to e-mail.

I have put off a decision on whether to participate in Facebook. I did unwittingly create a Facebook profile several months ago. I needed to fill out some information in order to check out the Facebook page of the Fellowship's campus ministries, and in so doing created a Facebook page. Before I knew it, I was deluged with friend requests from others on Facebook. I pretty much ignored all of them. But then two things happened in recent months to make me decide I want to do Facebook. The first is my oldest child went off to college this fall, and I've noticed that my wife—who is on Facebook—knows a lot more about what's going on our daughter's life than I do. Then a few weeks ago, my home e-mail box had a request from a woman who went to Sri Lanka with me in 1983. She found me on Facebook. She's someone I've thought about a lot because we became good friends on that trip, and her parents were co-ministers in a UU church. It was fabulous to exchange messages and to see pictures of her and her husband and young kids.

So here's I would answer the three questions that guide my use of communication technology. First, what is my purpose in using Facebook? My purpose is to connect with distant family and friends. My purpose may change in a month or a year, but for now, my purpose in Facebooking is not to facilitate my work. I know from colleagues that Facebook can be an extraordinarily effective tool in ministry. I don't doubt this at all, but I know that I get enough electronic communication through e-mail at work. The last thing I want to do after a long day here is to go home and Facebook about work. So my clarity about the purpose of using Facebook helps me know how I wish to use it: I'm going to use it to keep in touch with distant family and friends. These are the people I'm going to "befriend" on Facebook. This means I'm not going to seek or accept friend requests from any of you. I hope you will not take offense at this. I also will not seek or accept friend requests from distant colleagues unless I have a deep friendship with them. I will also say no to people from my past with whom I have really only been acquainted—like a kid who sat next to me for a year in elementary school but with whom I never really hung out.

Second question: How can I be real and authentic as I use Facebook? The key here will be to realize that for me, Facebook is not a substitute for phone contact or face-to-face contact, especially with close friends and family. It will be good to feel more connected to people through Facebook, but it's not the same as visiting them. I need to remember the high value I place on direct experiences of deep connectedness.

Third question: How can I use Facebook skillfully? I need to spend a little time learning how it works. Last weekend I had a reminder that this is an important task when I made a basic and completely avoidable error. I really didn't understand that in Facebook I can communicate directly with a friend, or write on the friend's wall a message that many others will read as well. My niece was coming to town for the Dallas game and we hadn't settled on when we'd get together. She Facebooked me about getting together. I replied with my home phone number and cell phone number and asked her to call. But I didn't do this directly to her; instead, I posted it on her wall. So I put my contact number out there for all of her Facebook friends to see. Probably not a big deal, but not smart either. I need to learn more about how Facebook works. Since I'll also learn by doing Facebook, this leads to a second skillful means to use in Facebooking: I need to remember that whatever I post may be seen by a lot of people. In Dottie's words, potentially at least "the whole world is watching."⁴

And how about e-mail connected with my work? How do I answer these three questions about e-mail?

The first question has to do with purpose: What is my purpose in using e-mail at work? My purpose is to facilitate communication. I see e-mail as a complement to other forms of communication—most notably face-to-face and by phone. My purpose is not to make e-mail my primary vehicle of communication.

Second question: How can I be real and authentic as I e-mail at work? One way is to make sure I'm honest in what I write. E-mail is a marvelous vehicle for, well, BS. In their wonderful book on how to use e-mail skillfully, David Shipley and Will Schwalbe put it succinctly: "What every sentence needs: the truth."⁵ They suggest

⁴ http://www.fvuuf.org/component/option.com_docman/Itemid,127/, p. 6.

⁵ David Shipley and Will Schwalbe, *Send: The Essential Guide to Email for Office and Home* (New York, Knopf, 2007), p. 138.

another great guide to being real and authentic in e-mail: don't do it too quickly. Speed kills wisdom and discretion. They write, "On e-mail, people aren't quite themselves: they are angrier, less sympathetic, less aware, more easily wounded, even more gossipy and duplicitous. E-mail has a tendency to encourage the lesser angels of our nature."⁶ Their solution to this is to go slower and especially to stop and think before pushing "Send." So I try to ask myself before pushing send: "Is this really me? Is this really *what* I want to say? Is this is really *how* I want to say this?"

And third question: How can I use e-mail skillfully? Here are seven ways that work for me—when I actually use them (which isn't enough of the time). They might work for you. Or they might not—each of us different.

My first skillful means is, as Dottie suggested in her sermon last month, to realize the inherent limitations of electronic communication. "When we are typing away," Dottie said, "we have no way to add inflection or eye contact or to adjust the cadence of our words. This leaves out a significant portion of our ability to communicate."⁷ This reality asks us to weigh carefully whether e-mail is the best way to communicate whatever we want to say. If what we want to communicate conveys emotions—particularly anger—or is complicated, there may be a better way to communicate. Rather than fire off an e-mail, it may be time to pick up the phone, or set up a face-to-face meeting.

A second way to use e-mail skillfully is to avoid sending unnecessary e-mail. We are each part of the solution to unnecessary and time-wasting e-mail. So I very rarely forward items of potential interest to others, and to be honest, I generally delete unread forwarded items sent to me. I'm not saying this so that you'll all stop sending me things that might be of interest; just know that I may delete them unread. Or I may open them and use them in the next sermon!

Third, I try to keep the messages I write clear and simple. It's also helpful to keep the message subjects clear and simple. If I am asking someone to do something, I try to convey simply and clearly what that request is. If my message is too complicated to capture easily in an e-mail, then it is probably time to pick up the phone or set up a meeting.

Fourth, I find it helpful to be disciplined about when to use e-mail (though much too often I fail to do this). It doesn't work for me to have my in-box constantly open on my desk-top so that I can go back and forth from e-mail throughout the day. This makes it too hard for me to get other things done. The best approach for me is to allot a certain, finite amount of time to e-mail no more than once or twice a day.

Fifth, I try to ascribe good intentions to the sender, even when I am tempted to be offended by something expressed in an e-mail message. For this I find inspiration in our Fellowship's "Principles for a Healthy Congregation," the statement we've adopted which expresses how we'd like to interact with each other in this beloved community. This statement has a line that is very helpful in cultivating this skill: "Be open, courteous and forgiving with each other, suspend judgment of those with whom we disagree, and offer each other kindness and encouragement."⁸ Sound advice for getting along with each other here, and also sound advice for communicating electronically.

⁶ Shipley and Schwalbe, pp. 10-11.

⁷ Mathews, p. 4.

⁸ http://www.fvuuf.org/images/stories/principles_for_a_hc/principles_for_a_healthy_congregation.pdf.

Sixth, I try to remember that, as with Facebook, whatever I put in an e-mail message has the capability of becoming public. Mean or angry or unfair or stupid messages can come back to haunt. Just ask Michael Brown, the head of FEMA during Katrina. One message he sent to FEMA staff on the day the storm hit the Gulf Coast said, “Are you proud of me? Can I quit now? Can I go home?” Another one later that day said, “If you’ll look at my lovely FEMA attire you’ll really vomit. I am a fashion god.” And the next day he wrote this to FEMA staff: “I’m not answering that question, but do have a question. Do you know of anyone who dog-sits?” Sadly for Michael Brown, these and other inane and callous messages became public and contributed to his disgrace.

And seventh, it is helpful to let people you e-mail know if you are not always very timely in your responses. So I am letting you know: I’m not always very timely in my responses. I try, but the volume is too great to keep up with. Plus, in the few days before I have to do a sermon, I really don’t have time to keep up with e-mail. I’ll try to scan it for urgent messages, but my time is generally better spent working on my sermon. So if you need a more timely reply to an e-mail than you’re getting, pick up the phone and let me know you need a more urgent answer.

Shipley and Schwalbe summarize all of this with a wonderful e-mail Golden Rule: “Send e-mail you would like to receive.”⁹ This is a great thing to contemplate before hitting “Send.”

I agree with Thich Nhat Hanh’s observation that was our Call to Gather: “There is no enlightenment outside of daily life.” Our daily lives provide countless opportunities to be spiritual people. E-mail, Facebook and other forms of communication are no exception to this. Just like cooking in the kitchen (as the reading beautifully expressed), electronic communication requires us to be fully present if we want to do it skillfully and meaningfully. The same thing can be said about vacuuming the floor or conversing at the dinner table or making love with our partner or driving our car. Like all of these, electronic communication provides us ample opportunities to practice our spirituality. We can be spiritually awake when we e-mail or Facebook, or we can be asleep. We can be mindful, or we can be distracted or reactive. We can treat others like we’d like to be treated, or we can send them messages we’d not want to receive. We can be our real selves, or we can be inauthentic. The choice is ours.

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⁹ Shipley and Schwalbe, p. 222.