

Technology and the Art of Discrimination

By Michelle Wheeler

Most of us probably don't make a regular habit of discriminating among our cultural artifacts, stepping out of our own contexts long enough to contemplate the content of our lives, how it came to be, and the ultimate value of it. (Don't we, in fact, call it "crisis" when we do?) The consequences of inheriting a culture usually include succumbing to at least a few unconscious behaviors and harboring at least a few unexamined attitudes. As long as collateral damage isn't too much in our faces, it's easy enough to live on autopilot, becoming addicted to immediate gratification, short-term pleasure, and gain delivered through modern technologies.

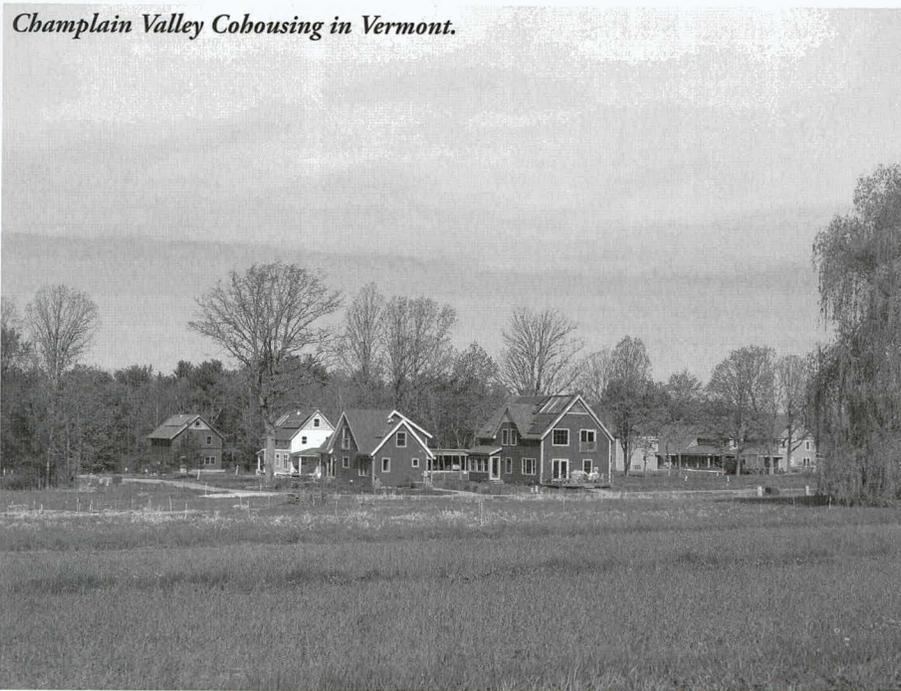
I've certainly used industrial products for purely selfish reasons—unnecessary motorized transportation, mindless media entertainment, processed frozen foods shipped from thousands of miles away. I've known what it's like to want so-called efficiency, escape, and convenience, and I've known what it's like to want more of it, sometimes just because I've thought I deserved it, especially after spending 50 weeks a year in high-tech jobs that were less than inspiring. Ironic.

But then sometimes things shift (crisis time) and we have no choice but to stop living unintentionally. It's a ripe time for rationalizing that the overall payoff for using high tech will compensate for any messes we might be leaving behind. For instance, had it not been for the internet and modern communications technology and all the flotsam and jetsam the industry has created to get us to this point, I wouldn't have known about Champlain Valley Cohousing in Vermont, over a thousand miles away from where I made my first call of inquiry in Georgia. Six years later, I am thankful for that bundle of high tech so instrumental in my family's landing in community. Believing our lives now all richer and more balanced, I can tell myself that the computer, the phone, and the network lines were all tools utilized to raise our sights to the potential of cooperative living.

But then we have to know when to stop when we're ahead. We have to know when enough is enough.

Even within our intentional communities, it's still all too easy to go down the slippery slope of convenience and lose sight of original intent and the bigger picture. A recent situation in cohousing comes to mind. A working group met to discuss an upcoming visioning meeting for which we were seeking input from community members. Some had previously suggested using Survey Monkey to distribute the list of items on which we needed feedback (it might have even been me!). Luckily, I grew impatient while others tried to figure out how to use the tool (including determining the costs) and suggested I simply type up the questionnaire and deliver it by hand to each of 17 households. The rest of the working group agreed to my method and the next day I had four lengthy and satisfying face-to-face conversations that never would have happened had I used the higher-tech alternative.

Champlain Valley Cohousing in Vermont.



With a seemingly endless supply of toys in the world, what helps me to remember that I relish being able to look into people's eyes, hear the timbre of their voices, and interpret their gestures and expressions on their faces? Who knows, but maybe an invisible energy transfers from their body to mine. Where is the toy that helps me to remember that I don't have to be content by flattened experiences online when the nuances of face-to-face human communication offer so much more?

The beauty of simple pleasures in the film *The Hundred Foot Journey* has been my most recent source of inspiration. In the movie (low budget, hopefully?), an automobile breakdown lands the main family in a little French village in which they decide to stay to open a restaurant. The action quickly shifts from traveling over distances to living locally. Cars give way to bicycles, providing characters more opportunities to actually interact with one another. In the meantime, they are slicing and dicing locally grown vegetables in all their many colors, adding aromatic arrays of spices, and rolling their eyes with pleasure as they taste and savor the flavors of their creations. It all makes me wonder how we so easily allow this kind of richness—good food, good work, good company, beautiful and natural surroundings—to leak out of our lives and communities? I'm thinking the indiscriminate use of tech has a lot to do with it.

Over and over again, we have the classic "which came first, the chicken or the egg?" conundrum. For instance, high tech and boredom. New gadgetry relieves boredom until it doesn't anymore, at which time new gadgetry is sought to relieve the boredom. And then there's high tech and debt, financial and otherwise. Debt too often leads to desperate measures, including adopting industrial solutions that in other circumstances might have been avoided. And what about high tech and the lack of solid foundational community support? If we don't have real places where our gifts as individuals are valued and respected, we all risk becoming more machine-oriented and disconnected from one another.

And so what are we to do?

First of all, we need to bring the concept of appropriate technology to the forefront. Critical masses need to realize that "appropriate" suggests alternatives, which implies the need to hang onto more basic skill sets though they may seem primitive. We have to remember that much high-tech research and development initially addressed extraordinary circumstances. It doesn't mean the rest of us should later adopt consumer versions just because they are marketed to us, often at much higher costs than what just appears on the price tag.

Second, we need to set aside some sacred time for reflection and inspiration, turning into a religious act the practice of being discriminating in our use of technology. Though the sheer pace of modern life makes it hard to break free from unconsciousness, we need to regularly question whether the way we spend our time is balanced and in accordance with our values. (I now understand why traditional churches and religious organizations meet weekly, to remind congregants of their missions in an uplifting hour or more of music and messages to keep the masses moving forward or at least from slipping backward. It pays to be proactive.)

Third, we need to nurture creativity and critical thinking within community. A very practical tradition might be to focus annually on community contingency plans when and if there are breakdowns in high-tech systems, as we did in the small West Virginia town I called home in 1999. Months before the official turn of the century, I joined a small group that gathered regularly to discuss emergency plans for the chaos that might ensue at the stroke of midnight on New Year's Eve. We organized into groups focused on local food supplies, communications channels, healthcare access, and more. We researched alterna-

tives and connected with others whose products and services would be crucial in keeping our town humming. We compiled information and finally held a low-tech fair for the entire community, altering Y2K to mean "Year To Kindle" local relationships. No matter what one's core motivation or driving force—peace of mind, intimacy, empowerment, or just plain fun—it was a winning event for all.

If we really wanted to get serious about community and ecological sustainability, as many intentional communities claim, we might just do as Ben Falk suggests in the title of his essay "When the Ecofads Fade, Ditch the Carbon-Footprint Calcula-

A constant barrage of newer and better has kept products and services fresh while blinding us to the hidden costs or externalities stemming from our technological embrace.

tor and Pick up a Shovel." He wrote, "No doubt this movement toward no-VOC paint, ecotourism, green building, CFLs, organic foods, fair-trade goods, low-flow fixtures, hybrid vehicles, and more stringent regulations slowed the rate of cultural- and natural-resource obliteration, but it has not reversed the trend... These progressive consumer and political movements of the late twentieth century failed to change the underlying structure that gave rise to massive human-ecological unsustainability in the first place."¹

With so many people and places suffering the not-so-pleasant consequences of extractive and laboratory economies, I do feel increasingly guilty as a consumer. Whether I want to think about it or not, my modern American lifestyle has been complicit in environmental atrocities like mountaintop removal, climate change, and water contamination. With industry capitalizing on an increasingly chaotic world and inherent human inclinations to seek

(continued on p. 73)

1. Falk, Ben. "When the Ecofads Fade, Ditch the Carbon-Footprint Calculator and Pick up a Shovel," *Vermont Commons*, Spring 2010, p. 5.

TECHNOLOGY AND THE ART OF DISCRIMINATION

(continued from p. 29)

adventure, find shortcuts, and exercise independence (not to mention maintain addictions), a constant barrage of newer and better has kept products and services fresh while blinding us to the less obvious burdens, the hidden costs or externalities, stemming from our technological embrace.

Naturally, I appreciate research and development in service of easing suffering, but when new technologies starting out as novelties and unnecessary conveniences for most of us insidiously turn into those perceived as essential, red flags go up for me. Major industries now, for instance, take full advantage of the economic efficiencies wireless telecommunications bring to business, making it nearly impossible for the domino-like rest of us to keep opting out. With no precautionary principal in place to safeguard longer-term individual and community health, not to mention that of other species, it's hard to tell what the future holds in store for our bodies, minds, and very souls.

In Vermont, some of the kids call me Miss Grass Cutter because they've seen me trim the yard with scissors. It's true that I find using simple tools and technology richer experiences and much more satisfying. While I usually clip our postage stamp-sized yard with a reel mower that burns no noxious petroleum products and leaves my hearing in good shape, I do frequently pull out my uber-durable scissors to get to tougher spots. Some mornings are sublime as I stoop over individual blades and see all kinds of little critters up close. What the kids don't realize is that some people pay big bucks for similar experiences elsewhere calling it a workout or meditation or therapy.

I can only hope that in time the children have enough of their own low-tech experiences, and that they learn how to judge for themselves and find the courage to be different if need be. Some say there's no turning back on the trajectory that technology is taking us, but that implies a passivity that is difficult for me to accept. It can be done as long as we are reminded of the rewards when we do so. For me, the ultimate reward is being present in my own life. I can only hope that I continue to find others desiring the same. 🐦

After completing all coursework for a Ph.D. in Computer Science, Michelle realized that the question she was really fixated on was whether or not people were really happy, and why? She currently lives at Champlain Valley Cohousing in Charlotte, Vermont.

Single?
Ready for an
amazing relationship?



Meet your
eco-conscious partner on

**green
singles®**

www.GreenSingles.com

Find more resources at
ic.org/communities

The Farm

May 22-24, 2015 Communities Conference

Celebrating Over 40 Years of Life In Community!

Green Homes & Ecovillage Tours
Sustainable Food Production

Workshops: Governance, Small Business,
Midwifery, Spirituality, Outreach, and more.

Land as the Foundation

**Take home ideas on how to build
community wherever you are!**



The Solar School



Community Dinner

Registration Fee: \$175 Students \$125 camping & vegetarian meals included - accommodations available
contact: Douglas@thefarmcommunity.com 931-964-2590 931-626-4035 cell

www.thefarmcommunity.com/conference

See our entire 2015 retreat calendar at www.greenliferetreats.com

Copyright of Communities is the property of Fellowship International Community and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.