

Turning our Backs to Apps: Technology, Spirituality, and Sex

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I remember sitting on wooden chairs arranged in rows on Sunday mornings in my church basement. Mrs. Hemsley lifted an invisible weight with her open palms, the sign for us kids to stand. Piano music announced the next song, “This little light of mine.” Half in boredom, half in reverie, we rehearsed an almost unimaginable idea: human beings radiate light. To be human was celestial; it endowed us with resplendence. To squelch the fullness of this radiance was a betrayal of human sanctity. “Hide it under a bushel?” we sang. “No!” we stomped. “I’m gonna let it shine!” In the Lysol-scented basement, we sang for shared human light that entwined us to the divine in each other.

Those lyrics, seared into my pre-pubescent DNA, make it painful when I see people -- myself included -- genuflecting more to the glow of dating apps than to the radiance of bodied, brained, and beautiful human beings. To what degree has smartphone convenience become more than addiction, but a betrayal of a sacred fire burning within and between all of humanity? In the age of smartphones, being “in the closet” might no longer apply exclusively to gay isolation. Speaking as a member of the gay community, I wonder if the glow of the screen has seduced us all, regardless of sexuality, into the closet and out of public life, our inborn resplendence atrophying with the dying battery-life of phones. Looking up from my phone, I see my closet literally feet from me as I sit at home before the glow of thumbnail-sized likenesses of men on dating apps instead of adventuring toward the sacred bioluminescence of real humans.

And this time, inching toward the closet is more disturbing than ever. It’s not foisted upon me by society. I’m doing it to myself. We’re doing it to each other. We voluntarily pay fees to phone providers to hide our lights under smartphone bushels. App convenience has become more important than living the divine truth I learned in my church basement: expressing inborn glow is an imperative from God. We do not have to upload a picture to an app or pay a dime to Verizon to illuminate. Exchanging and sharing human light is not a monthly service from AT&T or Sprint,

but an eternal, free gift from God. Stumbling out of the closet to reclaim our inborn iridescence and find our way back to each other cannot be solved by GPS upgrades, but demands a spiritual reprogramming toward our common human radiance.

Sexual pleasure, spiritual fullness, and technological promise are not incompatible. As spiritual scholar Thomas Merton wrote more than fifty years ago, “technology can elevate and improve man’s life only on one condition: that it remains subservient to his *real* interests; that it respects his true being.” Our true being is to serve not phone providers and app updates, but our soul, that weightless and wild interior-GPS that never requires monthly fees to connect to ourselves and others. Only our souls – not algorithmic radar – signal wisdom and intuition that must be given more space in public conversations about the role of technology in betraying or furthering our soul intelligence. Insofar as we allow technology’s “ethic of expediency and efficiency” to take precedence over “the basic needs of man,” Merton writes that technology becomes “genocidal,” a tool to destroy ourselves. Merton, following ancient wisdom from Plato, cautions that technology’s betrayal of human light may not be obvious, but seductive. Technology camouflages its dehumanization with appearances of comfort, convenience, and even beauty. But when the addiction to technological glow (more followers! more pixels!) overrides the cultivation of inborn luminosity, technology disgraces us. Abandoning the hard work of cultivating inborn divine light for the ease of apps, we get to be lazy and leave unquestioned the cliché that technology is progress.

Smartphones draw attention to an epidemic of brushing off human light not limited to dating-app culture. Sherry Turkle, a professor at MIT, studies the ways in which technology impacts all human relationships. *In Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other*, Turkle points out that smartphones are popular not only because they make daily life convenient, but because of a deeper reason: they “meet our human vulnerabilities,” allowing us to feel a sense of control over human interactions that are unpredictable. Because we are vulnerable to feeling unwanted, misunderstood, or just plain nervous in our interactions with each other, smartphones give us a modicum of control over when, where, and how we respond to each other. Rather than do the hard work of befriending uncertainty and discomfort that are integral to self-exploration and human interrelation, we take the easy way out and look at our phones to surf the web. We escape inner discomfort and anxiety by attending to devices instead of to the commotion in our hearts. When we study Instagram rather than the aches in our own hearts, we are less equipped to reach out with interest toward the human mystery of ourselves and others. Suffering from an epidemic of hiding behind screens, we are less practiced to undergo the inner work necessary to live with one

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another. The emotional range of motion we're able to extend to ourselves and each other becomes smaller. We're so distracted by glowing phones we are not in touch with the emotional constriction this distraction causes. We mistake this constriction for normalcy.

For gay individuals, Turkle's observations about hiding behind phones take on startling consequences. Gay men increasingly rely on apps not only because we, like everyone, hide our vulnerabilities behind the screen, but also because we use phones as receptacles in which to pour desires that are dangerous in public life. In a still homophobic culture, smartphones make us feel safer. Turning to apps in private on our phones increasingly appeals because it allows us to hide from public life our interests in other men's light. If we can meet men on apps instead of the gay bar, no one will see us at the bar and accuse us of suspicious desires. If we can use an app to communicate, no one can suspect a questionable sexuality if we strike up a conversation in a coffee shop. With apps, we need no longer flirt in public at the gym or library. We do not need to expose that we're drawn to men's light because we can wait until we're in the safety of our private closets -- living rooms or kitchens -- to open the app and indulge sexual curiosity. Thus, app usage throws into relief the sickly state of gayness in public life, not its health. Gay desire becomes less a God-given free exchange of male radiance than a piece of plastic we have to pay for.

Almost all religious traditions tell a coming-out story of a figure brave enough to emit superabundant light in public. Humanity's oldest story, *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, is a love story between two men, Gilgamesh and Enkidu. The epic opens with sun god Shamash creating Gilgamesh, literature's founding protagonist. Henceforth, protagonists in religious texts follow the pattern of associating light with sharing love in public. In the Torah, one of God's first acts is to "let there be light," an ingredient which eventually gets mixed in to his most prized creations, Adam and Eve. Later, as a burning bush, God is flaming, literally. He extends his love to Moses publicly, flaming heat rising from that bush. In the Christian tradition, Jesus is said to be "the light of the world." Like gay people, Jesus risked public condemnation for his love that went out of bounds. Jesus famously came out of the closet to show affection, touch, and love toward those in public whom it was forbidden: so-called sexual deviants such as prostitutes and adulterers, poor people, ill people, national and religious others, even his opponents. Allah in the Quran expresses radiance and shares "the Light of the heavens and the earth" with those bold souls who adventure beyond the safety of their private corners and seek him. "Namaste," the Sanskrit greeting and blessing common across Buddhist and Hindu traditions, means "I bow to the light in you which is the light in me." The figures worthy of emulation in spiritual traditions come out in public to express light, tantamount to extending

humanitarianism. Radiance, like the divine, is freewheeling. It adventures out of bounds, peeks out from underneath closet doors.

Some of us are beginning to inch out of the closet from behind our bushels. I sensed during last summer's gay pride festivals that participants clutched these public events more dearly than ever, like anything rare and therefore sacred. To witness so many living-and-breathing human beings out in public transmitting bio-luminosity through flirtatious eyes, impromptu gestures, and enlivening conversation can seem overwhelming after having become accustomed to pics of each other squeezed into jail cells of app grids. When the light of day hurts our eyes, public gatherings in this age of smartphones thrill like a jailbreak. As Emily Dickinson might say, we were "shattered with Dawn," communal light waves emanating from our shared presence. We "stood bewildered," stunned by the kingdom of human resplendence holding our beers and pride flags.

Our collective stupor in the sun signals a change in the experience of eros. Sexuality typically names attraction toward human beings. But now our sexual orientation tends more toward screens. Perhaps this orientation toward pictures is a new expression of queerness, since "queer" names a style of challenging typical categories of sexuality such as gay, straight, and bisexual. Some people might argue that orienting desire to the glow of screens more than to the radiance of human beings ushers forth a new queer sexuality: "I'm neither gay, straight, nor bi. I'm pic-sexual."

But pic-sexuality comes at great cost to the soul. Perhaps we've complied to squashing our sexual radiance into a screen because we think we deserve to be small. Many of us grew up in sexually phobic – especially homophobic -- environs eager to delete the delicious strangeness of human eroticism.

Some app users do celebrate these technologies as opportunities to express a freer sexuality and thus a more fulfilled humanity. Gay people for instance express sexuality in annual pride parades and on cruises to get married, and now across the far-flung reaches of the interwebs. With apps, we connect to each other on a scale heretofore unseen. Pointing north, south, east, and west, apps expand our paths to sexual freedom anytime, anywhere. Like glancing at the online menu, ordering the pizza, and choosing pick-up or delivery, there's always a thumbnail-sized picture ready and waiting to deliver what you order. A never-ending buffet open 24-7. What's there to complain about?

"A lot," stomps my eight-year-old self from the church basement. That interior flame – this little light of mine, of yours, of ours – needs oxygen to flare. As gay bars, the traditional places for gay radiance to breathe, increasingly shut down, apps become one of the only sites left to follow the flame of desire, not only in rural

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areas, but in urban ones too. Many gay men, for example, use apps not because they like them, but because they are becoming the only remaining crumbs leading to each other. Gay apps are not freeing us. They reduce the space we occupy in public life. They are pushing us back into closets and out of public visibility, removing us from the public picture. Hiding our lights under smartphone bushels is one reason for gay spaces such as bars and lounges shutting down, and for business owners not risking to open more. As June Thomas writes in a recent *Slate* article, “The Gay Bar: Can It Survive?,” the number of gay bars “has declined from peaks in the 1970s,” when there were “118 gay bars in San Francisco; now there are 33. Manhattan’s peak came in 1978, with 86; the current tally is 44.” Thomas attributes this decline in part to people of all sexual stripes deciding to go out less and stay in more – on their phones. We can now socialize on our phones, in the privacy of our own homes. But for Thomas, staying in the closet on the phone does not disgrace our radiant divinity. She concludes that “our need for community can be met by interaction with feeds and comment streams.”

But I do not believe phones supply the substance of community for which human beings hunger. I ache for a community of warm bodies, not warm plastic. When I interact on my phone, I’m bonding with plastic unequipped to register the magnitude of my luminosity, unlike a human being, whose light is powered by mine. When we stay home chained to our phones, we’re moths to a bankrupt flame. The gay bar where the intelligence of our bodies determines attraction goes out of business. With mobile devices incapable of computing mysteries of desire in hand, I cage my eyesight to a five-inch plane. I share my erotic light with a device that disgraces it through robotic indifference.

Hiding our lights behind phones, particularly for vulnerable communities in the U.S., may be understandable given the country’s political climate. People feel increasingly entitled to commit acts in the name of patriotism that were once understood as hate crimes. Men who desire men join the growing list of undesirables, targets of individual and juridical violence including women, Muslim people and Muslim Americans and their families and friends, transgender people, people of color, and immigrant communities. The glamorous glow of pictures on apps is seductive – so seductive it makes exile from each other feel pleasant instead of genocidal. But backing into our hiding places will not save us. Turning to apps, we’re doing people who oppose “undesirables” like queer folk or immigrants a favor.

So, step into your closet. But only to grab your jacket.

Share your light with others by strolling on the sidewalk, walking to a different department at work, visiting the bar – all without your phone. When you get the urge to look into a phone, look into eyes instead, or at the curvature

not of plastic but of a person's jaw journeying to the ear. Listen to voices during conversations, hold the gem of a spoken word in your imagination, turn it over in wonder at its kaleidoscopic magnificence. These wonders are all free; we'll never have to pay a dime to the app store for them. If leaving the phone behind is too much too soon, then use apps to exchange lasting, not throwaway, light: poems, dreams, and art.

Recognizing luminosity as our defining feature demands we approach and delight in each other differently. We are our bodies, and we are more than our bodies. We speak of sexuality in terms of orientation. But doesn't sexuality disorient, throw us off compass? Phones we can predict. iPhones 12, 13, and 14 are coming. Only humans leave us guessing, each gesture, glance, and tongue-tied exchange a shape-shifting lightning bolt sent from the heavens it is our privilege to witness.

My evangelical church in small-town Ohio taught me to stomp my feet and say "no" for the sake of bio-luminosity. Let's stomp together: "No!" we're not going to hide our light under smartphone bushels any longer. Let's glory in the kingdom by disorienting our longings from the screen. For gay men in particular, let's show the world how our twenty-first-century desire can disorient modern love toward a bolder, nobler queerness: the radiance of each other.

Turn off your phone. Try it with me.