

## **The Desert of the Real**

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By Rev. Dr. Joshua Snyder

I identify far too well with Barbara Merritt's story about the roof leaking and destroying her calendar. And not perhaps for the reasons you might think. I am fond of saying that we have at First Unitarian Church two kinds of roofs: those that have leaked in the past and those that will leak in the future. Admittedly it was the leak in the story that caught my attention initially, but it is the destruction of her calendar that I sympathize with. For you see this summer I had the high tech equivalent of that happen to me: my work computer was infected with a virus and the hard drive was "fried." That is literally the term the computer guy used to describe it.

Fortunately our system backs up a lot of data, but it didn't back up everything. Plans I had made for the church year, topics to discuss with staff, new and exciting books to read that would revolutionize my ministry and this church simply by having them in my possession, these were all lost. As you can see I may have romanticized the significance and quality of the few pieces of information no longer available to me.

But lost it was, and it revealed to me just how dependent I am on technology.

I know that I am not the only one in this room who should be confessing this. If you don't believe me, take a moment and feel for that cell phone in your pocket, in your purse, or on your belt. Make sure the ringer is off of course. Just about ten years ago cell phones were a luxury. Few people had them, and those that did flaunted them. Now look at how ubiquitous they all are. Have you ever left the house without your cell phone and turned around to get it because you knew that you had left a vital piece of equipment behind? Just think a decade ago you didn't have one to miss, now it feels like walking a tight rope without a net. The same could be said for e-mail, but I won't belabor the point.

There is a well known painting called "The Treachery of Images" by the Belgian artist Rene Magritte. It is reprinted on the front of your order of service. It shows a picture of a pipe with the words, "Ceci n'est une pipe" or in English "This is not a pipe." An odd claim to make, for clearly for all to see that is a pipe. But in fact it is true, that is not a pipe; it is a picture of a pipe. In fact it is a photocopy of a reprint on the internet of a painting of a pipe. How many levels removed from an actual pipe is that? Hence the "Treachery of Images" as the title states.

There is no doubt that technology has made an impressive impact on the modern world. On the whole, I would probably even venture to say that its impact has been more improvement than detriment. But one obstacle that technology has put before us is our dependence on it. My computer crashing brought that home to me. But what really happened? What was really lost? A magnetic disk in a plastic box stopped working properly. My life did not come to an end; I lost nothing real, just the reflections of something real.

This happens all the time, and in fact it is happening right now. In the spirit of self-awareness that Magritte reveals in his painting on a pipe, I would point to something very near and dear to my heart, and hopefully yours: sermons. What is a sermon? Fred Craddock, in his classic book “Preaching” spends an entire book asking that very question. Is a sermon this piece of paper I am reading from? Is it PDF document that gets posted on the website about a week from now? The office staff and I certainly work on that assumption. I for one would never dream of walking into this pulpit without this piece of paper, and if I don’t e-mail the document to our Program Administrator to post on the web she gets very upset. “Where is your sermon?” she asks. It isn’t done until the paper is complete. I happen to know that Bob Doss spent thirty plus years preaching from this pulpit from handwritten texts which were later typed out by the church secretary and mimeographed for distribution. But Craddock would disagree with all of us. A sermon has

nothing to do with what you bring with you to the pulpit. It has everything to do with the words you say, and then that is only half of it. The other half of a sermon happens in the listening and understanding of the people hearing it. I only bring half of a sermon on Sunday morning, how you hear it and what you do with it in your lives is what a sermon really is.

So what is this thing, this piece of paper before me? The French philosopher Jean Baudrillard came up with a word for things like a painting of a pipe or the text of a sermon. He called them “simulacra.” He points out that modern technology has enabled us to perfectly replicate things on video or audio media. Indeed this is possible to such a degree that we can’t tell the difference between the thing being copied and the copy itself. Unless we stop to think hard about it, our minds often don’t make the distinction. The original and the copy are so closely identical that there is really no difference. We might be able to tell that Magritte’s painting is just a painting—it is not that good that you are tempted to reach in and grab it as if it were a real pipe. You could say that it is imperfect, a simulation of a pipe. But now we have gone to the next level, thanks to technology. Instead of a copy simulating the original, the two cannot be distinguished, they are both simulacra. Copy and original are indistinguishable. Baudrillard calls this situation in which we find ourselves “The desert of the real.”

Some of you may be familiar with this philosophy. Have any of you seen the movie “The Matrix”? The Matrix is probably the best science fiction movie of the 1990s. In one of the early scenes Keanu Reeves, who plays a computer hacker, keeps his contraband computer disks in a hollowed out book: “Simulacra and Simulation” by Jean Baudrillard. It is a movie that continually asks given our technology, how do we know what is real and what is a perfect replica of what is real? And does the difference matter in the end? We are all in the same position as Chuang Tzu: unsure if we are a man dreaming we are a butterfly, or a butterfly who woke up from dreaming it was a man.

One of my favorite simulacrum, if you will, is the comedian Stephen Colbert. He is a comedian who imitates a conservative talk show hosts like Glen Beck and Bill O’Reilly. Yet he does so for the purposes of political satire. If you watch carefully, conservatives are not the only butt of the joke. He goes after everyone at some point. Once he decided to go after Wikipedia, the online encyclopedia where anyone can sign up and add their knowledge to this massive database. Colbert told his viewers to go on to Wikipedia and change it to say that African elephants are NOT an endangered species, but rather are quite plentiful. Rather than rallying around some environmental cause to actually increase their numbers, he decided to simply alter the description of African elephants most of the world sees. Colbert has said that reality

has a well known liberal bias. So he altered “wiki-reality”; the reality we collectively make with our minds.

In the desert of the real, we can't tell the difference between a fake talk show and a real one. Who is making fun of whom? Is reality just a collective wiki experience made up of our personal perspectives and knitted together somehow? What is more is that technology embraces simulacra. How many movies are out now that are in “3D”? Anyone own a high-definition television? Watching things on TV or in the movies are considered better, the harder it is to tell the difference between the medium and real life. Video games are the same way. Sony will be putting out a game that allows you to create and interact with a virtual pet that you see on your TV. The Guitar Hero and Rock Band video games are based not on shooting but on playing musical instruments. The latest iteration of these games coming out in time for this holiday season will feature guitars, keyboards, even drums that are nearly indistinguishable from actual instruments. The artist Prince has refused to let any of his songs be played on these games saying that kids should learn how to play a real guitar and not the simulacra of a guitar. Who would have thought that Prince would start to sound like an old fuddy duddy. But he has a point. Ceci n'est une pipe. Or Ceci n'est une guitar!

This leaves us in a very confusing state, not unlike Alice traveling down the rabbit hole and finding herself in the bizarre field of

Wonderland; also a frequent reference in the Matrix movie. The Unitarian Universalist theologian Paul Rasor describes it this way:

“In the postmodern world, the foundations of knowledge have disappeared. There is no such thing as certain knowledge or ultimate truth. Things we once thought gave us firm foundations, such as universal human reason or common experience, turn out to be bounded by language and culture and gender. Everything is relativized. What we used to think of as truth is now interpretation....The metaphors we commonly use, such as looking at the same light through different windows or going up the same mountains on different paths, are all challenged in postmodernity. In the postmodern way of thinking, there is no longer truth. We are all wandering around on different paths (or lost in the bush!) on different mountains....In religious terms, we are left potentially without a deep grounding or even a shared reference point for our prophetic voice.”

If everything is an indistinguishable copy of another, a vast collection of simulacra, then the world starts to feel very fragmented and shallow. I think this experience contributes to a number of people being wary of technology. It has flattened the world, as Thomas Friedman wrote, in ways that are both wonderful and depressing. Once upon a time, the east and west coast of America were so vastly separated from each other that they built the Panama canal because it was easier to get to the California that way than traveling there over land. Now it is a jet

ride away after a couple of hours. Or a couple of minutes by phone. A couple of seconds by internet. That is exciting, from one point of view, until you realize that they have the same restaurants in the same strip malls on the same streets that we have here in Delaware. As the world gets flatter it gets more boring. A “McWorld” as Ben Barber once dubbed it.

Technology has allowed us to connect with each other in amazing ways. It has tremendous breadth. Global breadth. People on the other side of the world are nearly instantly available to me. When there were political protests against the government in Iran a couple of years ago, they kicked out all of the reporters of the major news networks. But we still knew what was happening there because regular people would post videos on Twitter and YouTube. Technology connects us across vast distances.

Sadly though, for all of its breadth, our technology lacks depth. Facebook is perhaps the best example here. Facebook is in essence a simulacrum of having friends. Some of you are very familiar with Facebook, and others perhaps not so much. In essence Facebook is a way to connect in a very, very broad sense to many people in your life. Your high school friends, your family, your co-workers, members of your church, all of them are literally instantly available to you 24 hours a day. Yet they are available only in the most superficial ways. Instead of sitting down with an old friend you knew from high school and really

reconnecting with them at a deep level after a number of years, Facebook allows you to find out what that person had for lunch last Tuesday, or what they think of the latest movie that they saw over the weekend. It is “friendship” in a rather shallow sense. You can be the “friend” of any celebrity, politician or TV show you are interested in, and hear about the latest things happening. But do they care about you? Is there a depth to that relationship?

There was a kind of freedom in my computer crashing over the summer. It was bad because I had to redo a lot of my long range and intermediate planning in my professional life. But it was good in that I got to redo some new planning in my professional life. I lost the list of topics to discuss at our staff meetings, and when I asked the staff to help me recreate it, we came up with half a dozen new and exciting topics to tackle instead. Without my computer crashing, we would never have been presented with that opportunity to be creative.

Barbara Merritt comes to understand that there is a difference between her calendar and her real life. Her calendar was a simulacrum—she could not tell the difference between her life and the calendar that kept it “organized.” It was only when the copy was destroyed, and she was left with just this, just this life as it is, that she came to see and experience the difference. That is what I felt too, and I invite you to experience it for yourself.

You will notice there is a new set of spiritual homework this month. The “renew within” assignment is one worth noting: take one day this month, do a media fast. Turn off the TV, the internet, even books and magazines, and the radio in the car. Just experience the people in your life right here as they are. Give some space for grace to shine through. I for one am looking forward to trying a media fast of my own. We can all use a little break from the desert of the real. Perhaps your media fast can be the proverbial oasis in that desert.

We should remember that simulacra are all around us. We can’t help it, nor should we feel guilty about it. Technology transforms us, and we should not fool ourselves into thinking that it is entirely within our power to resist that transformation. Even here at church we are working on putting up a Facebook page for you to follow. Recently we acquired the recording technology that will allow us to podcast sermons over our website. That means you can log on to the web and listen to a sermon on your iPod. But remember: You are not listening to a sermon. You are not hearing my voice. You have white buds in your ears and are listening to a simulacra—an mp3 file that replicates a sermon. Cesi n’est une sermon.

Technology can be life transforming, in that we can get more done and be entertained in amazing new ways. Yet technology can also distract us and fool us into thinking that the compelling stories and images it throws up to our consciousness are real. Don’t be fooled, you

can tell the difference if you are reflective and vigilant. Unplug every once and a while, and relate to the world and the people in your life in the hear and now.

May we live a life that is real, and connect with each other in ways both broad and deep. Amen Blessed Be.