

Slaves to Technology

I was just sitting down to connect to my new internet service the other day, feeling relieved and hopeful. After 3 months or hair-pulling challenges with my previous supplier, I'd come to the end of my rope and jumped ship. The new installation disk seemed straightforward and simple and those famous last words "how hard can it be?" echoed through my head with a kind of childish glee as I popped the disk into my laptop.

Following along with the prompts on my computer screen, I plugged all the cords into their respective outlets and flipped the switch on the modem. I sat back to enjoy the mini Christmas light display on the front of the unit anticipating the lightening speed I was about to enjoy surfing the internet. In a couple of seconds, only 2 lights remained solid green and I was pretty sure there were supposed to be 4. I consulted the guide again and looked back at the unit willing the other lights to come on. I waited with a sense of let-down and frustration that seemed a little out of proportion to the situation. After a few more moments, I decided the phone jack must be faulty and decided to move the whole set-up into the other room. No luck.

After another few minutes of muttered prayers and curses, I threw in the towel and called tech support where I was connected to the pleasant auto-attendant who informed me that "due to heavy call volumes, my wait time would be approximately 30 minutes." My blood pressure began climbing.

I'm sure you can guess that things didn't end here. Even as I write this, I'm still not connected! And yes, being without internet is undoubtedly inconvenient, but as a life-long student of the human psyche, it was my reaction to the whole situation that got my attention. I think of myself as a fairly mild-mannered individual who has the usual aversions to anger and hostility. But when this "mild-mannered" individual learned that the internet supplier had accidentally set up internet in the apartment next door, she threatened, harassed and became downright belligerent. The anger and frustration I felt were surprisingly huge, but even more disconcerting was the fact that I felt justified tearing a shred off a complete stranger!!

Over the next few days, I mentioned my debacle to a few friends who responded with the kind of sympathy normally given to people who've been in car accidents or lost their jobs. This was obviously a situation people could relate to, but why were we getting so bent out of shape? I suspected it had to do with our loss of control.

Most people go through life anticipating a certain level of control. We expect things (and sometimes people) to conform to our vision and while we certainly have some ability to exert influence on our environment, the power we actually have is usually a LOT less than we think and the wise part in all of us knows it. But we lean on the illusion simply because it beats the scarier alternative of not knowing. It's kind of like staying in an unsatisfying relationship because it feels safer than being single.

Some areas of life may appear to mold to our expectations more readily than others, but technology typically isn't one of them. It operates according to mysterious principals that most of us don't really understand (even if we did watch "Pirates of Silicon Valley.") We may have mastered the VCR five years ago, but the exponential growth in the variety and complexity of electronic devices leaves most of us feeling overwhelmed and enslaved to the "help line." Expecting technology to conform is asking for trouble. But here's the rub. We've gone and gotten ourselves hooked on the very thing we can't

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control. Few of us can imagine living without cellular phones or the internet. It's intrinsic to our modern day life and we expect them to perform as promised. So when things go wrong, which they often do, our illusion of control is shattered, leaving us to face what's been true all along – how little control we actually have. And that frightens even the most stalwart among us, which can lead to all sorts of rage, blame, belligerence and giving up.

So how do we coexist with technology (and more specifically, the unknown) without going on blood pressure medication or pulling chunks of hair out of our head? Here are a few simple solutions to help you ease off your addiction to the illusion of control.

Enjoy the ride!

You don't do a full track-inspection before riding a roller coaster, measuring angles, calculating stomach drops and so on. You just get on and go. That's the fun of a roller coaster! And so it is with life. The fact is, life unfolds according to a plan more elusive than the Caramilk secret and Davinci code all rolled into one and most of us through the gracious gift of hind-sight acknowledge the inherent wisdom in this. It takes practice to shift from seeing the unknown as scary to seeing it as exciting, but it is possible. Make a list of all the times in your life where you've gone down an unknown road with exciting results. This is your track record and reminder to let go. Carry it with you. When I sat back and got perspective on my internet situation, I discovered that there was a LOT of work I could do that didn't require the internet. It was a very freeing discovery.

Fire the movie directors in your head!

I created a movie in my mind that I'd be online within an hour and I fully expected and anticipated that life would unfold accordingly. Never mind that my movie was based purely on my convenience and not much else. Everyone does this. I call them "mind movies" and they are usually at cross purposes with reality (except about every 0.01% of the time) and just about every spiritual tradition teaches in its own way that clinging to those mind movies is what creates suffering. But we enjoy our game of "let's pretend." Remember when you were little and got to sit on your dad's knee while he was driving (It was the '60's. Things were more lenient back then!) Dad let us pretend we were driving. But not for one second (unless we had a really crappy dad) would he have allowed us to steer into oncoming traffic. And because we thought we were controlling this big powerful vehicle, we felt powerful. That's the addictive "hit." As soon as you notice you're in a movie, derail it with a basic centering and presencing exercise. Spend 5 minutes focusing on your toes, elbows, fingertips and scalp. Breathe deeply and try and feel the air as it passes down your throat. Once you're feeling grounded, review your track record from letting go!

Give yourself a break. You're human!

For most of us, losing control is scary. And it doesn't matter how many times we tell ourselves to chill out and let go, saying it doesn't make it so. Don't beat yourself up if you can't kick the control habit immediately. Sometimes it takes understanding the reasons behind our craving for control in order to develop the necessary compassion for letting go. The unknown can be a terrifying place. If we just sit back and let things unfold, we fear that bad things will happen and people might get hurt or disappointed. It's not wrong or right to feel these things. It's just how most of the world thinks. But by being gentle and accepting of ourselves and not beating ourselves up for sliding back into our efforts to control, we stand a far greater chance of detoxing from our addiction to control.