

From Data to Wisdom

IDEAS | The world is speeding up, but some things just aren't built to run faster. The human heart is one of them.

BY WAYNE MULLER

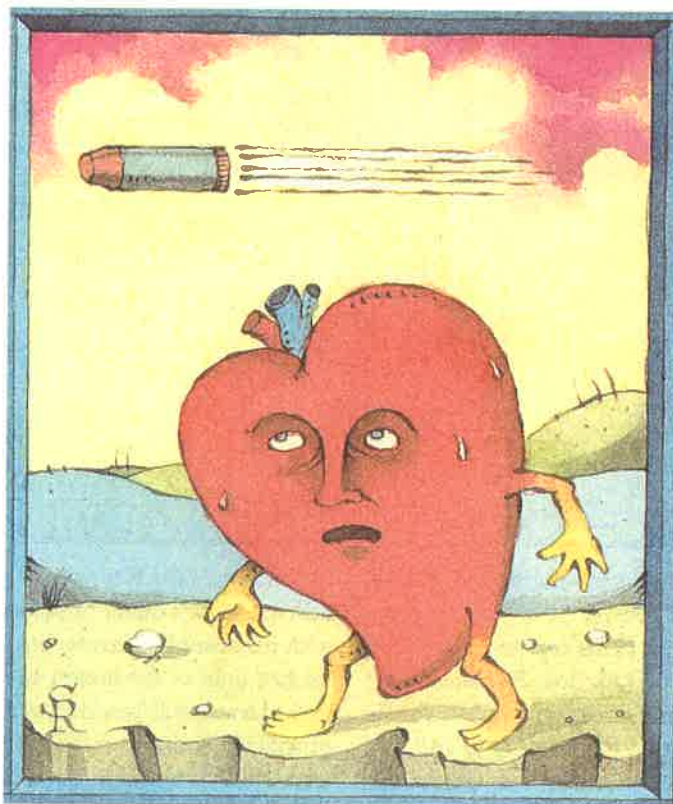
TRY THIS: FIRST, ALLOW AN IMAGE OF A MOUNTAIN TO form in your mind. Then, picture a car. Now, think of a forest. Now a puppy, then a fish, a stone, a turtle, an American flag. You have no trouble keeping up. The mind has an astonishing ability to shift and swerve from thought to image without much hesitation or difficulty.

Now, try this: Allow yourself to become thoroughly excited. Now feel terribly sad. Now feel confused, then angry. Now feel serene, now lonely and, finally, blissful. Having trouble? Like most of us, you probably feel a bit rushed, left behind.

The human soul needs time to digest, absorb and comprehend emotions and experiences. Regardless of the external pressure or coercion, the soul cannot be rushed. We must metabolize events and feelings in order to fully apprehend and understand our lives. It takes time for data to become wisdom.

The word "technology"—from the Greek "techne" and "logia"—literally means the wisdom of craft. When we call one type of technology "high" and another "low," we set up an unfortunate and inaccurate hierarchy between the wisdom of the mind and the wisdom of the heart. Perhaps it is more useful to use the words "outward" and "inward" to differentiate between those technologies that interact with the outer world at the speed of the lightning-quick mind, and those that serve the inner concerns of the contemplative, reflective—and slower—soul.

Traditionally, technologies of the mind were necessarily married to technologies of the heart. Carpenters and miners, blacksmiths and farmers joined eye and hand, heart and soul, to craft, build and grow what was good and beautiful and necessary. European farmers would pray over their fields before planting. Egyptian miners would fast before extracting ore from the womb of Mother Earth. When I lived in Peru, the priest was



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always expected to bless the roof of a new home.

Industrialization drove a wedge between heart and hand. In 1800 Eli Whitney brought ten muskets to

Thomas Jefferson and John Adams, took them all apart and scrambled them on the table. At random Whitney took a part from one musket and attached it to another until he had re-assembled ten muskets from the scattered parts. Jefferson, realizing the potential of high-speed construction of interchangeable parts, granted Whitney an extended military contract to manufacture muskets.

Ask any veteran of any war and he will agree it can take but a few seconds to assemble and fire a rifle. But he will also testify it can take years for the soul to recover from the moral ache of having pulled a trigger on a fellow human being.

We are losing sight of the inevitable fact that inward and outward technologies move at different speeds and possess different ethical capacities. Any technology can produce good or evil, depending solely on the heart of the hand that runs it. The PC on my desk is an invaluable family tool when my son and I send our picture over the Internet to my wife, working for five weeks in Nepal. While working in Latin America, I learned that government agencies used these same PCs to track dissidents and schedule their capture, torture and execution.

Arthur Zajonc, professor of physics at Amherst College, recently warned that our high-speed outer technology threatens to "become an autonomous technology, separated from us, that rests on an ethics alienated from our personal ethics." If we move faster but not more wisely, is that really better?

With the aid of outer technologies we can, in a few keystrokes, send out a million infected messages professing "I Love You" to strangers across the globe. But it takes a lifetime to learn to speak those same three simple words, honestly and directly, in the presence of another. ■

Wayne Muller is founder of Bread for the Journey, a nonprofit philanthropy. His most recent book is *Sabbath: Restoring the Sacred Rhythm of Rest* (Bantam Doubleday Dell).