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**Rev. James Martin, S.J.**

Catholic priest and author of 'The Jesuit Guide to (Almost) Everything'

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## Does E-Mail Make It Harder to Pray? How the Digital Age Is Changing Spiritual Life

"Hooked on Gadgets," a lengthy *New York Times* piece detailing how the Internet, e-mail, video games, and other digital innovations are influencing our lives, makes for sobering, and sometimes frightening, reading. Our increasing reliance on, and even addiction to, electronic media is changing the way we relate to our families and friends, and it may even be rewiring our brains.

It is also rewiring our relationship to God.

Whether commuting during rush hour, relaxing at home, or even traveling on vacations, many of us (me included) are never far from e-mail or without our cell phones. The sight of someone nervously pressing a phone against her ear as she races to catch a cab is a common one in many cities, as is the sight of traveler desperately punching out yet another e-mail on his laptop or BlackBerry as he waits for the next flight home in a crowded airport. And many parents, as the *Times* article pointed out, are increasingly fighting a battle against digital media overwhelming the family home.

While all these gadgets are terrific for keeping us in touch with our work and our families and friends, they also pare away the few remaining moments of solitary time we have left -- for reflection, silence, and inner quiet.

Where is the time for "recollection," as spiritual writers say?

How can the busy person balance the need to be "connected" with the need for solitude, a requirement of the healthy spiritual life?

Sometimes it seems as if we can no longer stand to be alone or be "out of touch." People use Facebook, cell phones, and text messages as a way of staying in touch with friends -- an admirable goal. Many websites, apps, and gadgets help us to draw closer together -- even if it's a virtual closeness.

But without some inner silence, it becomes harder to listen to God's voice within. It is more difficult to hear the "small, still" sound, as the First Book of Kings described God's voice. If your eyes are glued to your iPad and your ears stopped up by your iPod, it's hard to hear what might

be going on inside you. Cutting back on these gadgets, not answering every single e-mail and phone call right away, may be necessary for a measure of calm.

"Deep calls to deep," says Psalm 42. But what if you can't hear the deep?

Solitude and silence also enable us to connect on a deeper level with others, for we are put in touch with the deepest part of ourselves -- God. And in coming to know God, we are better able to find God in others and are freed of our loneliness and anomie. **Sometimes you have to disconnect to connect.**

Time set aside for contemplation and prayer also allows us to grow more aware of God's presence, which can sometimes feel elusive. We all need some time apart, some time alone, some silent moments with God, to enable us to recognize God's presence -- it's like having a quiet, one-on-one conversation with a close friend who wants to tell you something that requires your full attention. If you're *always* online, you might miss out on this one way of relating to God.

Likewise, if you're completely absorbed in the electronic world, obsessively checking e-mail or constantly returning phone calls, it becomes impossible to experience the quirky surprises in the world around us.

Not long ago, I was walking through a park in New York City. Racing across Union Square to an appointment, I stumbled on a pair of grungy young men, one with playing an accordion, the other a violin. Their music was a sprightly, lively, intricate, intoxicating type of Eastern European folk music. Mesmerized, I stopped to listen to the furious melodies and rising and falling rhythms. A little crowd gathered around, and I noticed that we were in the middle of the weekly open-air farmers' market, with vendors carefully laying out fresh fruits, vegetables, and flowering plants for all to see.

As I listened to these two skinny guys, one with long dreadlocks, the other with a scraggly beard, I smelled something unusual -- fresh peaches -- from behind me. What a glorious moment: the music, the sunshine, the crowd, the shoppers at the market, and the smell of ripe peaches.

Just then someone cut through the rest of the crowd: a woman punching her BlackBerry and listening to her iPod. She knifed through us and rushed away. She had missed the entire experience, since she was entirely absorbed in her own world.

Now, the web of course can also *help us* to pray. Many sites, like the astonishingly popular sacredspace, enable busy believers to log on to God. But those sites presume that you're actually shutting off your computer from time to time, so that from time to time you can have space for just you and God. Time uninterrupted by the "ping" of a new email.

Some of our digital busy-ness, I believe, may have to do with a tendency to overwork (which I am guilty of) and which also can take us away from time for solitude and prayer.

In 1547, St. Ignatius Loyola, the hard-working, hard-driving, and very energetic founder of the Jesuit Order, wrote to a group of young Jesuits at a school in Portugal, who were trying to outdo one another in over-the-top religious practices. The saint cautions against doing too much, and invites the young Jesuits to pace themselves, through the use of some homey metaphors. After all, the goal was to be a "contemplative in action," a busy person with a prayerful attitude:

Let your service be a reasonable service ... [F]irst ... God is not really served in the long run, as the horse worn out in the first days does not as a rule finish the journey. ... Second, gains that are made with this excessive eagerness are not usually kept. ... Third, there is the danger of being careless about overloading the vessel. There is danger, of course, in sailing it empty, as it can then be tossed about. ... But there is also danger of so overloading it as to cause it to sink.

Solitude also includes caring for one's physical health. Giving yourself the gift of solitude may mean allowing yourself time for rest and exercise, a necessary ingredient for a healthy life. This may include saying "no" to things that you cannot do. Saying "no" to some non-essentials and avoiding the constant rush that seems to characterize our lives (including my own) is a way of saying "yes" to a more balanced way of living.

Back to St. Ignatius. In the Constitutions he wrote up for the Jesuits, he placed a surprising emphasis on the need to attend to a "proper concern with the preservation of one's health." In a section entitled "The Preservation of the Body," the saint (one of the original multitaskers) talks about the need for a balance between work, prayer and rest, based on his own early experience, when he favored extreme penances that damaged his health. Ultimately, he recognized the need for moderation. "With a healthy body, you will be able to do much," he once wrote to a friend.

For Ignatius, the requirements for a healthy life includes maintaining a "regular" schedule, and caring for "food, clothing, living quarters, and other bodily needs." He recognized the need for exercise, even for sedentary Jesuits: "Just as it is unwise to assign so much physical labor that the spirit should be oppressed and the body be harmed, so too some bodily exercise to help both the body and the spirit is ordinarily expedient for all, even for those who must apply themselves to mental labors."

These ways of self-care are to be "exercised by all." It is a warning against the trap of overwork.

In his perfectly named book *CrazyBusy: Overstretched, Overbooked, and About to Snap*, Edward M. Hallowell, a psychiatrist, notes that pathological overwork may reflect not simply the real demands on our time, but may mask underlying problems. Overbusyness, he suggests, acts as a kind of "high" and also serves as a status symbol. We may also fear being "left out" if we slow down; and we avoid dealing with some of the realities of life -- poverty, death, global warming -- by frantically running from task to task. And, he suggests, we may not know how *not* to be busy.

Both a regular time for prayer and for solitude, and a mixture of work and rest, even in the midst of a busy life, is an important step on the way to becoming a contemplative in action. This does not mean that you have to be lazy. Far from it. But the possibility for contemplation grows slimmer if you are always stressed out, frazzled, or ready to collapse from fatigue.

Time for solitude and time for rest -- that is, time away from e-mail, the web, and the latest gadget (sorry, Mr. Jobs) is necessary for "recollection," for some quiet time with God. To connect, just disconnect.

*This essay was adapted from James Martin's new book The Jesuit Guide to (Almost) Everything.*