

Opinion: Maybe it's time for electronic liberation

By Terry Jeffrey

Years ago, the monks at Saint Catherine's Monastery, which sits at the foot of Mount Sinai, maintained a dormitory for visitors. It was a rustic place, where a noisy, gas-powered generator provided the only electricity.

Not long after nightfall, the monks would shut the generator down, converting the Sinai desert into the darkest place on Earth.

Yet it was a different sort of darkness that enveloped that monastery and that mountain. When the moon was down, the stars shone as brightly at the horizon as they did at the top of the sky. With no light seeping up from any city, and no clouds drifting by, it seemed as if the atmosphere itself had slipped away. No discernible barrier stood between earth and the infinite space above.



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There was nothing to do in a place like that but sit and think.

Today in America, we never turn off the generators. We are almost permanently leashed to electronic devices. We walk down the street with tiny telephones fixed to our ears. We sit in

parks texting messages on handheld devices to people whose voices we never need to hear. We carry tablets that hook us up to the Internet and that can effortlessly bring us, whenever and wherever we want, a 50-year-old movie or the very latest pop song.

Saint Ignatius Loyola made a powerful point. "Man is created to praise, reverence, and serve God our Lord, and by this means to save his soul," he wrote in his spiritual exercises. "The other things on the face of the earth are created for man to help him in attaining the end for which he is created."

In this view, virtually all inanimate things are merely tools that human beings can use for either good or evil. A razor is a good example. A person can use a type of razor to perform a surgery that saves a life – or use the same razor to slit a throat and destroy a life. In the former instance, the razor is used for great good; in the latter, for great evil.

But there is another principle: You would not give a razor to a toddler.

This is not because the razor is intrinsically bad. It is because the toddler could not possibly know how to handle it – and accidentally misusing a razor can cause as much harm as purposefully misusing one.

Perhaps we should start treating modern electronics with at least the sort of respect we have for sharp objects in our society. Surely, electronic devices – just like razors, scalpels and scissors – can be instruments of great good. But isn't it also true that they can do great harm?

Before the modern electronic revolution really got going, William Butler Yeats wrote a poem called "The Leaders of the Crowd." These were those, he wrote, who "hawk for news/Whatever their loose fantasy invent/And murmur it with bated breath, as though/The abounding gutter had been Helicon/Or calumny a song."

And these leaders of the crowd did not yet have an Internet at their disposal, or video games, or electronic tablets.

Asked Yeats: "How can they know/Truth flourishes where the student's lamp has shone/and there alone, that have no solitude?"

"So the crowd come they care not what may come," wrote Yeats.

Pope Benedict XVI made a powerful observation in his Easter Vigil sermon. "The darkness that poses a real threat to mankind, after all, is the fact that he can see and investigate tangible material things, but cannot see where the world is going or whence it comes, where our own life is going, what is good and what is evil," he said.

"If God and moral values, the difference between good and evil, remain in darkness, then all other 'lights,' that put such incredible technical feats within our reach, are not only progress but also dangers that put us and the world at risk," he said.

"Today we can illuminate our cities so brightly that the stars of the sky are no longer visible," said the pope. "Is this not an image of the problems caused by our version of enlightenment? With regard to material things, our knowledge and our technical accomplishments are legion, but what reaches beyond, the things of God and the question of good, we can no longer identify."

Out in the Sinai, where the stars shine as brightly as anywhere on earth, a nearly complete copy of the Bible, inscribed in Greek in the 4th century, sat in the monastery library, century after century, unknown to the Western world – until it was rediscovered in the 19th century.

Here in 21st century America, we should consider taking off our electronic leashes once in a while, dusting off our old books and teaching our children how to read them.

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