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Op Ed — Little Red Herrings — Addicted to Love, Sort Of

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We Americans are an addictive people. Give us a novelty and we’ll eventually have to turn it into a 12-step program. Fast food? We’ll eat it until it kills us. Painkillers? We’ll abuse them until denied them, and then turn to black tar heroin as a substitute. Pornography? Well, that “harmless” pastime has now become so prevalent among even young people that many think you don’t need a bedroom so much as an abattoir. And don’t get me started about gaming. Only yesterday (19 June), the World Health Organization (WHO) declared it an addictive behavior (https://bit.ly/2udHHWj), and now everyone is obsessing over whether it really is or not.

It now turns out that we’ve made smartphones a kind of hysteria, not to mention dementia (thanks, Apple). According to a study released in late 2017, the average person (whoever he is) checks his cellphone about eighty times a day. Eighty times, 8-0. I thought it was a misprint and then I began thinking about people I know, some I love, and some with whom I work (you know who you are). Eighty seemed too few. Only the stalwart can go more than ten minutes before checking her phone. And, I imagine by now, as you come to the end of this paragraph, you’re checking yours, too…again. We suffer separation anxiety when we go for long without these costly, annoying, rectangles we call “smart.” (The only “smart” in smart phones, do not in any way, shape or fashion, include these devices and their cousins (iPads, tablets) in the classroom and now reports what will be for some astonishing results: classes are much better, discussions more intelligent, and — shocking, I tell you — students getting better grades. No, you cannot have it all, and you cannot multitask even while failing at it.

I fear we are now like Macbeth: “in blood stepped so far that … returning were as tedious as go o’er.” I’m not asking for a ban of all devices everywhere and a return to clay tablets, so, please, no hate email. But it is time that we take this matter a bit more seriously.

Maybe little steps will help. Make eye contact with someone, invite him or her for coffee (and not by email), and perhaps even answer that last dinner invitation with a hand-written thank you. Try living an hour without your cellphone and then perhaps try going a day without it. It will not do, of course, if these are only isolated events that occur once, and that is all. Nevertheless, we have to start somewhere, and maybe, just maybe, seeing someone face-to-face will be the start of a kind of healing.

Text me @kipper if any of this works.