Prisoners of the Wired World

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This copyrighted essay is adapted from a longer speech that Lightman delivered at the annual Hart House lecture at the University of Toronto. In a revised form, it is the last chapter of his book A Sense of the Mysterious *(2005).*

Saturday, March 16, 2002

NOT LONG AGO, I was sitting at my desk at home and suddenly had the horrifying realization that I no longer waste time. It was one of those rare moments when the mind is able to slip out of itself, to gaze down on its convoluted grey mass from above, and to see what it is actually doing. And what I discovered in that flicker of heightened awareness was this: From the instant I open my eyes in the morning until I turn out the lights at night, I am at work on some project.

If I have hours, I can work at my laptop on an article or book. If I have a few minutes, I can answer a letter. With only seconds, I can check telephone messages. Unconsciously, without thinking about it, I have subdivided my waking day into smaller and smaller units of "efficient" time use, until there is no fat left on the bone, no breathing spaces remaining. I hardly ever give my mind permission to take a recess, go outdoors, and play. What have I become? A robot? A cog in a wheel? A unit of efficiency myself?

I can remember a time when I did not live in this way. I can remember those days of my childhood, when I would walk home from school by myself and take long detours through the woods. With the silence broken only by the sound of my own footsteps, I would sit on the banks of Cornfield Pond and waste hours watching tadpoles in the shallows or the sway of water grasses in the wind.

My mind meandered. I thought about what I wanted for dinner that night, whether God was a man or a woman, whether tadpoles knew they were destined to become frogs, what it would feel like to be dead, what I wanted to be when I became a man, the fresh bruise on my knee. When the light began fading, I wandered home.

I ask myself: What happened to those careless, wasteful hours at the pond? Has the world changed, or just me? Of course, part of the answer, perhaps a large part, is simply that I grew up.

Yet, I sense that some enormous transformation has indeed occurred in the world from the 1950s and 60s of my youth to the 21st century of today. A transformation so vast that it has altered all that we say and do and think, yet often in ways so subtle and pervasive that we are hardly aware. Among other things, the world is faster, less patient, louder, more wired, more public.

Haven't we all seen people talking on cell phones while dining or riding the train, deadlines and lead-times growing shorter and shorter, video screens imposed in the most unexpected of places?

All around me, everywhere I go, I feel a sense of urgency, a vague fear of not keeping up with the world, a vague fear of not being plugged-in. I feel like the character K in Kafka's *The Trial*, who lived in a world of ubiquitous suspicion and powerful but invisible authorities. Yet there is no real

authority here, only a pervasive mentality. I struggle to understand what has happened to the world and to me, why it has happened, and what exactly has been lost.

The dramatic development of technology, especially high-speed communication technologies, has certainly played a major role in shaping the world of today, both for good and for ill. Technology, however, is only a tool. Human hands work the tools. Behind the technology, I believe that our entire way of thinking has changed, our way of being in the world, our social and psychological ethos.

The various qualities of this new world are far too complex and broad to easily categorize, but I will attempt to gather them under the simplistic heading of the "Wired World." Certainly, few people could deny that the new technologies of the Wired World have improved life in many ways. Some of the less agreeable symptoms and features of the Wired World seem to be:

> 1. An obsession with speed and an accompanying impatience for all that does not move faster and faster. When we become accustomed to speed, it is natural to be impatient with slowness.

> 2. A sense of overload with information and other stimulation. Our computers are not only faster but they store more and more data. The Internet offers an almost infinite amount of information, at easy access. In the face of this avalanche of facts, far more than can be excavated or digested, it becomes easier to confuse information with knowledge.

> Television screens now are subdivided to show not only the regular program but also, simultaneously, weather information, the latest values of the Dow Jones and Nasdaq indexes, and news headlines. Many people have become accustomed to performing several tasks at the same time.

> 3. A mounting obsession with consumption and material wealth.

> 4. Accommodation to the virtual world. The artificial world of the television screen, the computer monitor, the cell phone has become so familiar that we often substitute it for real experience. Many new technologies encourage us to hold at a distance the world of immediate, face-to-face contact. Electronic mail, although very useful in some respects, is fundamentally impersonal and anonymous. The sociologist Sherry Turkle, in her book *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet*, discusses how people in "multi-user domains" have created entire, artificial communities in cyberspace, escaping for hours at a time the small rooms and meagre closets, the relationships or loneliness, of their real lives.

> 5. Loss of silence. We have grown accustomed to a constant background of machine noise wherever we are: cars, radios, televisions, fax machines, telephones and cell phones -- buzzes, hums, beeps, clatters and whines.

> 6. Loss of privacy. With many of the new communication technologies, we are, in effect, plugged-in and connected to the outer world 24 hours a day. Individuals are always accessible, always able to access. Each of us is part of a vast, public network of information, exchange, communication and business.

What have I personally lost when I no longer permit myself to "waste" time? When I never let my mind spin freely, without friction from projects or deadlines, when I never let my mind think about what it wants to think about, when I never sever myself from the rush and the heave of the external world -- what have I lost?

I believe that I have lost something of my inner self. By inner self, I mean that part of me that imagines, that dreams, that explores, that is constantly questioning who I am and what is important to me. My inner self is my true freedom. My inner self roots me to me, and to the ground beneath me. The sunlight and soil that nourish my inner self are solitude and personal reflection.

When I listen to my inner self, I hear the breathing of my spirit. Those breaths are so tiny and delicate, I need stillness to hear them, I need aloneness to hear them. I need vast, silent spaces in my mind. Without the breathing and the voice of my inner self, I am a prisoner of the world around me. Worse than a prisoner, because I do not know what has been taken away from me, I do not know who I am.

The struggle to hear one's inner self in the noise of the Wired World might be thought of in terms of private space versus public space. Public space -- the space of people and clocks and commerce and deadlines and cellular phones and e-mail -- is occupying more and more of our physical and psychic terrain. But the truly important spaces of one's being cannot be measured in terms of square miles or cubic centimetres. Private space is not a physical space. It is a space of the mind. It is the inner self. It is "soul space," to use writer Margaret Wertheim's words.

When Dante makes his great journey through heaven and hell in *The Divine Comedy*, he moves not only through physical space but also through spiritual space. He visits immaterial realms of good and evil, beauty, truth. No wonder his companion and guide is the poet Virgil. Poets are masters of the inner self. In earlier centuries, physical space and soul space were united in a whole way of being in the world, of understanding the world. That dualism and wholeness is what I have lost.

Sometimes, I picture America as a person and think that, like a person, our entire nation has an inner self. If so, does our nation recognize that it has an inner self, nourish that inner self, listen to its breathing in order to know who America is and what it believes in and where it is going?

If citizens of that nation, like me, have lost something of our inner selves, then what of the nation as a whole? If our nation cannot listen to its inner self, how can it listen to others? If our nation cannot grant itself true inner freedom, then how can it allow freedom for others? How can it bring itself into a respectful understanding and harmonious co-existence with other nations and cultures, so that we might truly contribute to peace in the world?

Leo Marx, the distinguished historian of American literature and traditions and my colleague at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, occasionally joins me for lunch. Leo's landmark book *The Machine in the Garden* (1964) examined the way that the American self-identity, defined since early days by pastoral themes and images, has been confronted with and reshaped by the advent of technology.

Leo is now in his early 80s. He still has most of his hair, his striking blue eyes still look back at me with a penetrating clarity, and, as we sit on a bench with our cheese and turkey sandwiches, he gently suggests how I might think about technology and other large forces of the day.

In his recent articles, Marx says that some time in the mid-19th century, the intention and direction of technology changed. Technology went from a means to humanitarian progress to an end in itself. The idea of progress, which had once meant an improvement in the human condition, became equated directly to technology. Progress was technology, technology was progress.

According to Marx and other historians of technology, at least two developments in the mid-19th century helped change the nature and perception of technology. First, some areas of technology

began to evolve from the individual-oriented "mechanic arts," like glass-blowing and woodworking, to large, depersonalized systems, like the railroad. Secondly, these vast technological systems became hugely more profitable than any previous technology in the history of the world, offering great personal wealth to their creators, so that technology became an instrument of the powerful enterprise called capitalism.

The earlier, mechanic arts were characterized by the skill of a small number of individuals and often a direct, personal contact between producer and consumer. By contrast, technological systems were large, amorphous organizations of machinery, people and bureaucratic structures, with many levels between producer and consumer.

Each railroad, the largest new technology of the 19th century, required thousands of workers, tracks laid for hundreds or thousands of miles, many stations, layers of bureaucracy and management, huge outlays of capital. (Compare to the cell phone networks of today.) No longer was technology a humanistic activity, with its principal purpose to improve the quality of life. This turn of events led Henry David Thoreau to make one of his more famous and witty remarks: "We do not ride on the railroad, it rides upon us."

An example that Marx uses to illustrate his point is a speech given by Daniel Webster, one of the foremost orators of the day, at the dedication of a new railroad in 1847: "It is an extraordinary era in which we live. . . . We have seen the ocean navigated and the solid land traversed by steam power, and intelligence communicated by electricity. Truly this is almost a miraculous era. . . . The progress of the age has almost outstripped human belief; the future is known only to Omniscience."

Aside from the reference to Omniscience, doesn't the tone seem similar to some of the speeches of [Microsoft chairman] Bill Gates or [Oracle chairman] Larry Ellison or [Intel Corp. co-founder] Gordon Moore? Nowhere in these words is there any reference to the quality of life, or human happiness, or the social betterment of humankind.

My investigations turn to capitalism, possibly the most powerful organizing force in the world of today, certainly in the United States of America. I am not surprised to learn that capitalism has helped redirect the thrust of invention. And I even wonder: Perhaps capitalism has always fuelled the fires of technology, even Watt's steam engines and power looms.

Capitalism lives on product, and no human creation has yielded product, with such high efficiency, as technology. More precisely, capitalism lives on profit, but the products of recent technologies have often translated into profits. Railroads, airplanes, telephones, automobiles, electric ranges and blenders, vacuum cleaners, dishwashers, microwaves and refrigerators, televisions and radios, Walkmans and CD players and video players, humidifiers, copying machines, fax machines, personal computers -- all have been gold mines for capitalism, returning great monetary gain to the inventors, creators, producers and distributers.

As a consumer, I have benefited like most people from these rapid developments. I purchased one of the first Hewlett-Packard pocket calculators in the early 1970s and have owned a succession of powerful desktop and laptop computers ever since. I am a member of a two-cell phone family. I have an electric garage-door opener. I watch videos at home. I use the Internet to keep up with friends in other countries. I have certainly benefited from the advances in technology. But I have also paid a heavy price. And that price is what I most want to understand.

A good illustration of the relentless way in which capitalism and technology operate together is in the production-consumption-work cycle of modern business. In the 1950s, academics forecast that as a result of new technology and increased productivity, by the year 2000 we could have a 20-hour workweek. Such a development would be a beautiful example of technology at the

service of the human being. Experts pondered how Americans would spend their impending leisure time. More family vacations? More time for sports? More movies? More reading, more attendance at musical concerts or stage productions or art galleries?

According to U.S. Bureau of Labor statistics, the goods and services produced per hour of work in the United States has indeed more than doubled since 1950. However, instead of reducing the workweek, the increased efficiencies and productivities have gone into increasing the salaries of workers. Managers, desiring more and more profit, have found it against their interests to shorten the workweek or to stitch together part-time positions.

Workers, for their part, have generally not lobbied for fewer hours but rather used their increased efficiencies and resulting increased disposable income to purchase more material goods. As mentioned earlier, consumption per person, in real dollars, has more than doubled since 1950.

Indeed, in a cruel irony, the workweek in America has actually lengthened. The sociologist Juliet Schor, in her important book *The Overworked American* (1991), found that the average American worked 160 hours longer each year in 1990 than 20 years earlier. And that increase in working time cuts across all income levels. More work is required to pay for more consumption, fuelled by more production, in an endless vicious cycle.

So it seems that we are running round and round like hamsters on the wheel of capitalism, production, demand, consumption and work. Instead of slowing down the wheel, increased productivity has only sped it up. Instead of creating breathing spaces in the workweek, increased efficiency has caused us to work faster and longer.

In this maze of counterintuitive results, it is hard to tell cause from effect, effect from cause. But one thing seems clear: We are working faster and harder than ever before. Everything in our lives has become faster, more hurried, more urgent. I cannot help but recall the first lines of William Wordsworth's poem, prescient in the way that artists often can divine the future:

> *The world is too much with us, late and soon*
> *Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers;*
> *Little we see in Nature that is ours;*
> *We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon!*

When I tour the U.S. to read from my recent novel about the frenzy of life in modern America, people everywhere speak about their frustrated inability to jump off the hamster wheel of capitalism and technology. The word "helpless" is often repeated. For many of us, the practical difficulties of changing our work conditions and life rhythms are indeed enormous. Living in the Wired World as we do, are we then helpless to create private spaces and silences to contemplate our inner selves? Are we helpless to disconnect from the network? Am I helpless to waste time? Am I helpless to regain my true freedom?

I do not think so. In an odd way, my growing understanding of the vast forces that shape modern life has only increased my resolve to counter those forces, to build a parallel universe for my inner life and spirit.

The key, it seems to me, is awareness. Becoming aware of the choices we have. Some of those choices are visible, some are not. We must become aware of the choices. Every day, each of us decides, consciously or unconsciously, what to buy from the marketplace, what machines to have in our offices and homes, how to use those machines, when and how to communicate with the outer world, how to spend our time, what to think about.

When do we unplug the telephone? When do we take our cell phones with us and when do we leave them behind? When do we read? When do we buy a new microwave or television or automobile? When do we use the Internet? When do we go out for a quiet walk to think? Do these decisions seem petty and trivial? At stake in these hundreds of daily decisions is the survival of our inner selves. We have choices, but we must become aware of the choices.

It seems to me that Canadians have a unique resource in creating private space: the North, that enormous tract of almost uninhabited land comprising the upper two-thirds of the country, that "tapestry of tundra," in the words of Glenn Gould, that largely untraveled world of snow and frozen lakes and wild geese, that infinite expanse of treeless horizon broken only by rare railroad tracks connecting such remote human outposts as Churchill or Fort St. John or Moosonee, a place of the imagination as well as the earth, an almost mythological conception, a mindscape.

Public space hardly exists in the North. (Please, dear God, never allow cell phone towers in the North.) The North is the inner self writ large, a vastness of silence. As someone said in Gould's *The Idea of North*, "A traveler to the North is up against himself."

But the most magical aspect of the North is that one can travel there in spirit without always going there in body. A few trips to the North last a lifetime of dreams. Just as I can mentally travel back to my childhood on Cornfield Pond, recall and rediscover that stillness and solitude and spirit of deep questioning, so we can mentally travel back to the North to listen to our inner selves.

The mere existence of the North creates soul space everywhere. The North inhabits the mind of every Canadian, and inhabits the mind of anyone who knows about the North. The North is a gift not just to Canadians but to the world.

The Wired World, for good and for ill, is probably here to stay. Capitalism and technology, for good and for ill, are an integral part of our lives and our society. Someday, there may be national and international limitations on the production and exportation of certain kinds of technologies (such as biotechnology), but these controls will face the powerful opposition of capitalism and the marketplace, and I do not believe we will see them in the near future. Capitalism and technology are probably here to stay.

But, as potent and pervasive as these forces are, I do not think we can blame them for the absence of privacy and silence and inner reflection in our lives. We must blame ourselves. For not letting my mind wander and roam, I must blame myself. For allowing myself to be plugged in to the frenzied world around me 24 hours a day, I must blame myself. I must determine my personal set of priorities and values, reflect on who I am and where I am going, become aware of those many small decisions I make throughout the day. The responsibility is mine.

Thoreau framed the problem well a century and a half ago when he said that we must produce better dwellings "without making them more costly; and the cost of a thing is the amount of what I will call life which is required to be exchanged for it, immediately or in the long run."

Somehow, each of us must figure out how to measure the "life," our personal life, our inner self, that we exchange for each piece of technology or scheduled project or public connection. This accounting may have to be done item by item, hour by hour, but I believe that it must be done and it can be done only by the individual. Only individuals can measure their own values and needs, their own spirit, their own quality of life.