Technology, Trauma, and the Wild

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CHELLIS GLENDINNING, a clinical psychologist, speaks of herself as a "neo-Luddite" social critic, by which she means someone who explores the full impact of industrial technology on humanity. She has been a pioneer in applying the psychological concepts of trauma and addiction to the ecological crisis. In her book My Name Is Chellis and I'm in Recovery from Western Civilization, she explores our disconnection from the Earth as the "original trauma" that has been interwoven with subsequent traumas, such as child abuse or the genocide of indigenous peoples. In her work, she seeks to reclaim the wisdom of native peoples and reconnect the psyche to the primal matrix of the Earth. In this essay, she shows us how the qualities that are hallmarks of substance abuse can be seen in urban-industrial society's addiction to technology. Her diagnosis has significant implications for environmental politics. If people cling to technology and its products in the same way alcoholics cling to liquor, then their behavior is more complex than simple "greed." Ecopsychologists like Glendinning are finding persuasive new ways to change the lives of people in industrial society.
I met with a young political activist for conversation last week at my favorite cafe. A profeminist man and founder of an antiwar youth organization during the Gulf War, this twenty-one-year-old lives to explore social issues and act on his convictions. His burning question of the hour concerned technology. "Has television made people less intelligent?" he wondered, and he based his conclusion on the deconstructionist dictate that one speak only from personal experience. His answer was, "Definitely not." Indeed, this young man's mental capacity was as substantial and his wit as sharp as I had seen in anyone of any age. But I could not help noticing that even before a quadruple espresso latte had exploded into his brain cells, my young friend was ranting at 120 words per minute, vibrating in his seat like a rocket poised for takeoff, hurling about words like VPL and Macromind, and answering his own questions in quantum leaps across paradigms un-integrated by any coherent worldview, physical reality, or moral obligation to life.

Like my friend, most of us who inhabit mass technological society find it difficult to understand technology's impact on social reality, let alone on our psyches. Like the tiny aerobic bacteria that reside within computer hardware, we are so entrenched in our technological world that we hardly know it exists. Yet widespread radioactive contamination, cancer epidemics, oil spills, toxic leaks, environmental illness, ozone holes, poisoned aquifers, and cultural and biological extinctions indicate that the technological construct encasing our every experience, perception, and political act stands in dire need of criticism. Further, such a critique requires integration by a coherent worldview, physical reality, and moral obligation to life.

At this point in history, it is essential that we ask difficult and searching questions about the place of technology in our lives. What is the essence of modern technology? How does it structure our lives? Our perceptions? Our politics? How does it shape our psyches? What does it say about our relationship to our humanness and to the Earth? Unfortunately, obstacles to answers are entrenched, like concrete piers at a freeway exchange, in both our social and psychological reality.

I discovered the scope of such obstacles while I was on a promotional tour for my book When Technology Wounds. The book is based on a psychological study of technology survivors: people who have become medically ill as a result of exposure to some health-threatening technology. I interviewed Love Canal residents, atomic veterans, asbestos workers, DES daughters, electronics-plant workers, Dalkon Shield users, homeowners whose groundwater had been contaminated, and Nevada Test Site downwinders, as well as sufferers of cancer, environmental illness, chronic fatigue, immune dysfunction, and many other problems.

By all accounts, this population is on the rise. Forty-one thousand Louisiana residents are exposed to 3.5 million tons of toxic landfill along the offshore corridor between Baton Rouge and New Orleans. Thirty million U.S. households, or ninety-six million people, live within fifty miles of a nuclear power plant. One hundred and thirty-five million residents in 122 cities and counties breathe consistently polluted air, while 250 million Americans—every one of us—are exposed to 2.6 billion pounds of pesticides each year, in addition to all the radioactive fallout raining the globe from Hiroshima, Chernobyl, and the nuclear test sites in Nevada and Kazakhstan.

On the tour, I suggested that since people everywhere are getting sick from technological exposure, we had best enter into an informed and reasoned conversation about technology. Such a conversation was not forthcoming. In a debate on National Public Radio with MIT Professor Marvin Minsky, the inventor of artificial intelligence, I was asked if I had any objections to computers. I expressed concern that the deadly chemicals used to manufacture computers contaminate the biosphere. I mentioned Yolanda Lozano, a thirty-six-year-old worker from a GTE plant in Albuquerque who died of cancer after being exposed to...
having both an advanced technology and this strange polarized way of looking at its world can survive."

To clarify this notion that contemporary society itself is based on what I call "techno-addiction," we would do well to remember that no machine stands alone. In other words, we will forever be trapped in a narcissistic "but I want my mammogram" analysis as long as we view technology only as specific machines that either serve us individually or do not. What Lewis Mumford calls the "mechanical order" or the "megamachine" is an entire psycho-socioeconomic system that includes all the machines in our midst; all the organizations and methods that make those machines possible; those of us who inhabit this technological construct; the ways in which we are socialized and required to participate in the system; and the ways we think, perceive, and feel as we attempt to survive within it.

What I am describing is a human-conceived, technology-centered social system built on principles of standardization, efficiency, linearity, and fragmentation, like an assembly line that fulfills production quotas but cares nothing for the people who operate it. Within this system, technology influences society. The automotive industry completely reorganized American society in the twentieth century. Likewise, nuclear weapons define global politics. At the same time, society reflects the technological ethos. The social organization of workplaces, as well as their architecture, reflects the mechanistic principles of standardization, efficiency, and production quotas.

From our everyday experience within mass technological society, we will note that "normal" acts like standing in line, obeying traffic signals, or registering for the draft all constitute acts of participation in this grand machine. Regarding our minds and bodies as disconnected in health and disease, or thinking that radioactive waste buried in the Earth won't eventually seep into the water table, are symptoms of the fragmented thinking that emerges from such a mechanical order.

Technology and society are completely interwoven. "Technology has become our environment as well as our ideology," writes the Dutch social critic Michiel Schwarz. "We no longer use technology, we live it."

Vine Deloria, a Sioux Indian and author of many books on Indian history and politics, describes the results of this social-technological imbrication as "the artificial universe":

Wilderness transformed into city streets, subways, giant buildings, and factories resulted in the complete substitution of the real world for the artificial world of the urban man. . . . Surrounded by an artificial universe when the warning signals are not the shape of the sky, the cry of the animals, the changing of seasons, but the simple flashing of the traffic light and the wall of the ambulance and police car, urban people have no idea what the natural universe is like.*

Langdon Winner, in Autonomous Technology, moves the idea further, arguing that the artifacts and methods invented since the technological revolution have developed in size and complexity to the point of canceling our very ability to grasp their impact upon us. The socially structured scientific-technological reality that now threatens to determine every aspect of our lives and encase the entire planet is out of control, he asserts.

Total immersion, loss of perspective, and loss of control tip us off to the link between the psychological process of addiction and the technological system. Addiction can be thought of as a progressive disease that begins with inner psychological changes, leads to changes in perception, behavior, and life-style, and then to total breakdown. The hallmark of this process is the out-of-control, often aimless compulsion to fill a lost sense of meaning and connectedness with substances like alcohol or experiences like fame.

Throughout the technological system, the recognized symptoms of the addictive process are blatantly evident. They are obvious in the behavior of those who promote technology to maintain control over society or to inflate their own bank accounts and egos. And they are evident for us all because our experience, knowledge, and sense of reality have been shaped by life in the technological world. Symptoms of the addictive process to be discussed here include denial, dishonesty, control, thinking disorders, grandiosity, and disconnection from one's feelings.


Dishonesty

This symptom is acted out by the alcoholic in secret drinking, sneaky behavior, and lying about feelings and activities. With respect to technology addiction, dishonesty reveals itself most blatantly in the behavior of corporations and government agencies whose self-interest lies in purveying offending technologies. We know, for example, that officials at A.H. Robins, the makers of the Dalkon Shield, knew in advance of the

potential medical risk of their product. Nonetheless, they sent it to market, and when reports and studies indicating ill effects became public knowledge, A. H. Robins claimed complete ignorance.

Control
Addicts need to control their world to maintain access to the source of their obsession. A workaholic I know who directs a small institute is incapable of negotiating even the smallest agreement, because input from others upsets her sense of control. Likewise, today's multinational corporations display an obsession with controlling the world's resources, consumer markets, workers' behavior, and public opinion toward their products.

Let us also consider the very structure of modern technology. The kinds of technologies a society develops are not as absolute or preordained as our ethos of linear progress would have us believe; they express a society's goals, both conscious and unconscious. In mass technological society there exists a striking resemblance between the kinds of technologies produced and tyrannical modes of political power. We could, in theory, focus our technological efforts on inventions that would permit us to meet basic human needs in as sustainable a manner as possible. Instead we strive to develop technologies, from dams to antiaging creams, that allow us an increasing degree of control over the natural world.

This desire for control often backfires when humans assume a position of extreme dependence on technical artifacts, and the lines blur between who is master and who is slave. What happens to our lives when cars break down or telephones go out? What happens when you don't own a fax machine, a computer, or a car? Technology's mastery over our lives translates into political disempowerment as well. The very conception, invention, development, and deployment of new technologies involves a highly undemocratic social process that is rationalized as "progress." The life experience of technology survivors attests to this fact: they are usually exposed to technological events that rob them of their health and livelihood without any warning or choice.

If the particular kinds of technologies in our midst exist to promote mastery and power, we might ask, for whom? And over whom? Windmills and tepees express democratic and ecological values because the very people who invent, produce, and maintain them are the same people who use them. By contrast, the technologies disseminated in mass society reflect a mentality of control over the natural world, space, other people, and even ourselves. As Jerry Mander points out, running a nuclear power plant requires tight, centralized control by both government and industry, first to produce such a capital-intensive project, then to master public opinion, and finally to provide military backup in case of sabotage, accidents, or public protest. The presence of nuclear, biological, and chemical weapons in a nation's arsenal not only controls that nation's enemies; it also frightens and intimidates, and thereby controls that nation's own citizens.

Thinking Disorders
Alcoholics and other substance abusers typically employ modes of thought that serve the immediate needs of the addiction, rather than the long-term well-being of the person. This is seen, for instance, in the alcoholic who drinks to alleviate the physical and emotional pain of the hangover.

Likewise, much thinking in mass technological society is dysfunctional. Many people embrace the "technological fix" as the answer to social, psychological, and medical problems caused by previous technological fixes. For instance, a proposed government program seeks to cover the oceans with polystyrene chips that, it is hoped, will reflect "unwanted" sunlight off the Earth's surface and save us from global warming. Likewise, some scientists suggest orbiting hundreds of satellites around the planet to block the sun's light. This is techno-addictive thinking at its most convoluted.

Grandiosity
The practicing alcoholic's delusion of inflated power is well known. The delusion of grandeur that fuels technological development is less apparent, more assumed. This grandiosity insists that mass technological society is superior to all other social arrangements. It implies that human


evolution is linear and always progressive, and that all societies should be judged by the yardstick of technological achievement.

Technological society's main organ of socialization, public relations, purveys the grandiosity of technology. "Master the Possibilities," teases the MasterCard ad. "What Exactly Can the World's Most Powerful and Expandable PC Do? Anything It Wants," promises the Compaq Desktop. At the same time, the "smart weapons" unleashed during Desert Storm and televised at home advertise that American technology, and America, are "Number One." Behind this all-too-earnest insistence lies the out-of-control, often aimless compulsion to create ever-increasing expressions of grandiosity—and the hallmark of the addict, to return continually to the source of aggrandizement. We need more cars, more televisions, more dams, more new technologies to prove our grandiosity.

Disconnected Feelings

Alcoholics are brimming with emotions, but they can't express themselves directly or constructively. Instead, their feelings are hidden from view in the shadows of their unconscious minds, and so they deny their feelings and live in a state of frozen emotion.

Likewise, survival in the technological system requires that we act "cool" and behave like machines. The hallmark of technological education is to learn mathematics to quantify reality, and to master fragmented thinking to function in a mechanistic world. Every subject we learn in school seems unrelated to the others.

Mass technological society is structured "top-down," its fragmented nature keeping most of us from ever grasping an understanding of the whole. The Manhattan Project that built the bombs that killed hundreds of thousands of people in Hiroshima and Nagasaki was constructed according to a mechanistic military model. The project included thirty-seven installations scattered across the United States and Canada, each providing one fragment of the production process. At the Los Alamos Laboratory, work was purposefully accomplished with a compartmentalization of tasks and a censoring of communication between scientists that enabled everyone involved to lose his or her sense of vulnerability and to engage in activities the consequence of which could neither be felt nor understood.

The upshot of such an approach to life is that feelings, experiences, and perceptions become disconnected from each other, and the unconscious mind becomes the receptor of repressed feelings. As a result, many of us tend to reside in a semiconscious state: the hideous and subterranean violations around us catalyze our feelings, but unacknowledged and unwelcome by the mechanistic world, we act them out in behaviors we neither feel nor understand. Like dropping the atomic bomb.

We must recognize systemic addiction in mass technological society if we are ever to achieve a state of psychological and technological well-being. The twelve-step recovery movement says that the addict must make “a searching and fearless moral inventory” of him- or herself. On the personal level, this includes claiming responsibility for instances in which we have violated another person’s integrity. On the collective level, we would claim responsibility for technological society’s uncounted violations against humanity, animals, the plant world, and the Earth. But lest our bleeding hearts overtake the process, let us be alert. As psychotherapist Terry Kellogg tells us, addictive behavior is not natural to the human species. It occurs because some untenable violation has happened to us.9

And indeed, we have undergone an untenable violation: a collective trauma that explains the insidious reality of addiction and abuse infusing our lives in mass technological society. The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders defines trauma as “an event that is outside the range of human experience and that would be markedly distressing to almost anyone.”10 The trauma endured by technological people like ourselves is the systemic and systematic removal of our lives from the natural world: from the tendrils of earthly textures, from the rhythms of sun and moon, from the spirits of the bears and trees, from the life force itself. This is also the systemic and systematic removal of our lives from


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Vine Deloria Jr. writes, "...about much of anything residing outside "the artificial technological universe with which we are familiar."

"Our experience in mass technological society is indeed "outside the range of human experience," and by the evidence of psychological research, this way of life has been "unnaturally distasteful" to almost everyone." (1973: 72)

In their oneness, traumatic events such as war, disease, climate change, and pandemics have caused trauma for their participants and impacted the lives of those around them. The psychological and emotional toll on individuals and communities is profound.

Nature-based people lived every day of their lives in the wilderness. Today, we are only beginning to grasp how such a life served the inherent emotional needs of the human psyche for development to full maturation and integration. In nature-based cultures, we can discover a lived sense of self, the human dignity that most of us admire only from afar, and a sense of the absolute, an awareness of the limits of our existence.

The hallmark of the traumatic response is dissociation: a process by which we split our consciousness, repress whole areas of experience, and shut down our full perception of the world. Dissociation results not only from direct traumatizing experience, but from the kinds of social and cultural experiences our ancestors assumed when they lived in rhythm with the natural world.

When we consider the kinds of social and cultural experiences our ancestors assumed when they lived in rhythm with the natural world, we see that they were privy to a continuity of awareness and participation that is lost in modern life. The loss of these psychological and cultural experiences in the face of an increasingly human-conjured and ultimately technologically determined reality, the loss of living in fluid participation with the wild, constitute the trauma we have inherited.
Today the world is awash in a sea of both personal and collective addictions: alcoholism, drug abuse, sex addiction, consumerism, eating disorders, codependence, and war making. In her book Co-Dependence, psychotherapist Anne Wilson Schaef points out that beneath these behaviors lies an identifiable disease process “whose assumptions, feelings, behaviors, and lack of spirit lead to a process of nonliving that is progressively death-oriented.” While her words describe the addictive process of individuals, they also characterize the techno-addiction of a civilization. Society is addicted to specific technologies like cars, supercomputers, and biological weapons, all of which facilitate an unhealthy propensity to control, numb the psyche from pain, and momentarily feed a craving for power.

Techno-addiction is also an addiction to a way of perceiving, experiencing, and thinking. As the world has become less organic and more dependent on techno-fixes for problems created by earlier techno-fixes, humans have substituted a new worldview for one once filled with clean rushing waters, coyotes, constellations of stars, tales of the ancestors, and people working together in sacred purpose. But the ancestors from the Western world took on the crucial task of redefining their worldview in a state of psychic dislocation, and so they ended up projecting a worldview that reflects the rage, terror, and dissociation of the traumatized state. They dreamed a world not of which humans are fully part, but one that we can define, compartmentalize, and control. They created linear perspective, the scientific-technological paradigm, and the mechanistic worldview.

Life on Earth encased in the product of such a construction is, to quote the Hopi, hopelessly koyaanisqatsi, or out of balance. As a psychologist, I believe that to address this imbalance at its roots will require more than public policy, regulation, or legislation. It will require a collective psychological process to heal us technological peoples who, through a mechanized culture, have lost touch with our essential humanity.