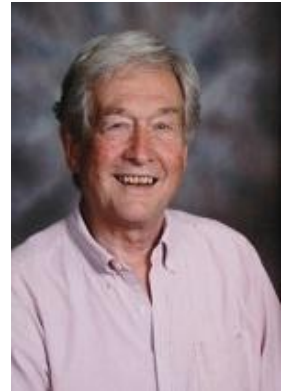


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ORAL or LITERATE or ELECTRONIC?

1 Scene One: The time is today. Twilight. A troupe of a dozen *Girl Guides* is gathered in a circle around a campfire on a lakeside in Ontario's Algonquin Park. One of their leaders is telling a bedtime ghost story. All of the young people assembled around her are listening with rapt attention as she spins her story by the flickering firelight. She's a terrific story teller. Her gestures and her facial expressions amplify and enrich the experience for everyone around the campfire...

2 Scene Two: The time is today. Twilight. A half dozen monks are gathered in a room in their European monastery that for centuries had been known as the Scriptorium. It's the room where, in an earlier age, their own Brothers, sitting in rows of desks, had copied, by hand, Medieval manuscripts in labourious, painstaking detail, complete with splendid hand embellished illuminations on each title page. But today, that labour has long since disappeared. Instead, their Scriptorium has been the home, first, for a clumsy, clattering Nineteenth Century letterpress printer. It now houses a state-of-the-art photo-offset digital printing system, humming unobtrusively in the background. Each of the Brothers is presently engaged in proof-reading galley sheets of a devotional volume they will presently publish. They're copy editors, oblivious to each other, even as they work side by side. They are making certain the printed texts in their hands contain no errors...

3 Scene Three: The time is today. Twilight. A family of four is gathered around a table at *Burger King*. Father, mother, teen aged son, pre-teen daughter. They've placed their orders and received them. As they eat, each member of the family is engrossed in a personal cell phone, and is devoting full attention to a tiny, flickering screen in their hand, or to tinny, scratchy sound waves in their ear. There is no communication among the family members. Father, mother, son, daughter: Each is in a private, individual electronic world of their own choosing...

4 It would not be difficult for you to conclude that the above vignettes together represent a kind of portrait of human history. Each of these scenes corresponds to a successive stage in our development as homo sapiens. They're chronological. Our first human ancestors lived in a culture that was strictly Oral. Then with the printing press, our forebears became Literate. Today our surrounding culture is fiercely Electronic. Libraries of books today testify to this cultural evolution.

5 But note: Each of the above vignettes is also fully contemporary. True, each represents a different successive culture – a chronological history of humankind. But you may find each of these also today, alive and well, depending on where you look.

6 Scene One represents an Oral Age, an oral culture: A speaker speaks and others listen. In a time before printing, before cell phones, that's all we had, as a human family. You lived out your entire life in an oral – or aural! – setting. To communicate, you had to look another person in the eye.

7 Scene Two represents a second development in human interaction: The Literate. Yes, we can still talk to each other and listen to each other, if we choose. But now we have a second set of cultural possibilities. The Printed Page. That page could have been meticulously hand embellished. It could have been printed by a letterpress. It could even have been reproduced digitally. In each case the effect is the same. We have a physical record of our exchanges. You can pay attention to a page, and not to a person, if you prefer. This very Essay is an exercise in the Literate.

8 Scene Three is also both historical and contemporary. (I myself was witness to precisely such a moment a couple of weeks ago in my own neighbourhood.) But this time, we have a snapshot of our Digital Age, our Electronic Age. Sure, we can still talk to each other and listen to each other, if we wish. But the printed page of Scene Two has been replaced by ghostly, ephemeral pixels on a screen. Or scratchy electronic signals in your ears. Welcome to the world you live in!

9 What I've tried to sketch out, in the preceding paragraphs, is a kind of evolution in human communication, and indeed in human life. From an Oral Culture, to a Literate Culture, to an Electronic Culture. You could argue – libraries of recent books have argued! – that each of these distinct cultures presents a new opportunity for a fuller and richer humanum. Human life and human experience are both, without doubt, richer, fuller, longer, safer, healthier. As I write these words, I am myself equipped with a state-of-the-art set of hearing aids, one in each ear. They're miracles of modern electronic technology. I'd be lost without them, in my daily life.

10 But you could also argue that each of these advances has presented us with some enormous challenges. As a teacher of mine maintains: "Each new technology carries with it its own distinct agenda. And we don't always discern that agenda until it's too late." Contemporary novels and movies are beginning to sketch out a vision of a dystopian future where high technology runs amok.

11 I've argued for forty years now – following my mentors: The notion is by no means original with me – that Christian worship is at its best when it remains steadfastly Oral. Christian worship is at its most engaging and its most soul-satisfying when it presents us with – when it immerses us in – Primary Experience.

12 Both the Literate and the Electronic, that is, however alluring they most certainly appear, present Christian worship with false and ultimately unsatisfying temptations.

13 From the standpoint of Christian worship, then, here's the chief disadvantage with Literate and Electronic cultures: They are both intensely private. Individualistic. Reading a printed text – even a printed text projected on a screen – is an acutely private experience. And Electronic culture can be private to the point of self-absorbed narcissism. See Scene Three above.

14 Christian worship, on the other hand, is acutely corporate. Collective. Communal. Singing a hymn. Listening to a Reading or to a Sermon. Affirming with your “Amen” an Intercession prayed aloud for others. Eating a common, ritual meal: Each of these experiences is much closer to Scene One above than to Scenes Two or Three.

15 Christian worship – unlike the worship of some other religions you could name – is corporate. Not private. So, as another friend maintains: Deal with it. Learn to live with it.

16 More than that: Try to learn to love it. Search out its assets and glories and depths. Try to discover the unexpected pleasures of the Corporate, the Collective, in human life.

17 Yes, you'll discover constraints and liabilities in the Corporate. And conversely, you'll find much to admire in the Literate and the Electronic. Certainly you will be free to celebrate the gifts and glories of Literacy, and of the Electronic. They do indeed enrich human life. That's worth celebrating. My electronic ears make my own life much richer. And a PA system in a large church is often a necessity, I'll admit.

18 But when you presume to question the unseemly grip of high technology in contemporary human life, beware! You'll be fighting the *zeitgeist*: a surrounding culture that has become scornful of the Oral, the Corporate, the Communal, and addicted to the Literate and the Electronic. Addicted to Individualism and Privatism.

19 The Literate and the Electronic have serious limitations, their own very real constraints and liabilities. Especially when they presume to enter Christian worship.

20 So: Be not dismayed! “There is one glory of the sun, and another glory of the moon”, to quote the Apostle. It will take sensitive worship leaders to discern the times and seasons when each is appropriate. And when not!

21 A final vignette, this one from the comics page. Does your daily newspaper feature the comic Zits? It's a brilliant picture, day after day, of the adolescent psyche. In my favourite panel, teen aged son Jeremy is speaking to his long-suffering mother:

22 “Mother, we live in the same house! You can always text me!”

23 Hah!

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