



PRINTER FRIENDLY

[\[Print\]](#) [\[Close\]](#)

Multi-tasking: Saving time but missing life's important moments

Tuesday, Jun. 05 2007

What time is it? Let me check the phone.

People and electronics are multi-tasking these days. Time was when a clock told the time, conversations were held by phone and computers processed data. Today, there are gizmos that can do all of these and capture the event in a digital photo.

The rapid innovations of technology challenge us on at least three levels. One is in creating adequate names for these multi-tasking machines. For example, I don't think of my phone as a camera. Perhaps a different name would help, one that also would address the phone's games, music and text-messaging capabilities I have yet to master. As it is, when I try to take a picture with my cell phone, my 13-year-old daughter grabs the phone, snaps the photo, attaches a text message and e-mails it before I can get my reading glasses on.

This brings me to the second challenge of technology.

One evening, this same daughter was setting the table and chatting away with a friend, the phone wedged between her ear and shoulder. Dinner was almost ready, so I asked her to finish her call. With a harrumph, she said goodbye and returned to the table. Then her dad walked into the kitchen. They bantered a bit. Within moments, a tickle fight erupted, the two of them all giggles and flailing appendages. Delighting in the silliness, I realized they never would have connected that way if one or the other had been preoccupied. They'd have missed the moment entirely.

While we're multi-tasking, how much are we missing? Neil Postman, a former New York University communications professor and cultural critic, is best known for his prescient 1985 book "Amusing Ourselves to Death." In his examination of television, he states: "Every new technology for thinking involves a trade-off. It giveth and it taketh away, although not quite in equal measure."

Take the clock, for example. Postman cites humanist Lewis Mumford's observation that the clock has transformed us from "time keepers to time savers to time servers." In our multi-tasking culture, we are at the mercy of time.

There are two kinds of time: the time we measure by the clock, and what some call "God's time" — those moments of inspiration, insight or connection with others. Does our service to one come at the expense of the other? The electronics that enable us to multi-task — save time — also distract us from the important moments in life. For all the time we've saved, we're too busy to notice.

Thirdly, there are practical considerations to multi-tasking. Beginning next year, the state of Washington has banned reading or composing text messages and talking on a cell phone without a hands-free device while driving. While the law may address the physical limitations of driving and using a cell phone, it

cannot regulate the driver's divided attention during a call. Joggers and cyclists can be seen with headphones listening to news, music or the latest self-help podcast while traveling busy streets. During meetings, participants take notes on a laptop, the upright monitor and clicking keyboard creating distance between themselves and others. While efficient, these forms of multi-tasking come at the expense of our safety and relationships.

Technology gives us greater access to more people, information and entertainment than ever before. I am not condemning the new technologies, but I do challenge us to remember who is in charge of them. We decide how our time is spent, and that allocation indicates our priorities. Take the call or the tickle fight? Which would you choose?

Maria Rodgers O'Rourke of Creve Coeur has worked in the advertising and not-for-profit fields and now juggles marriage, raising two daughters and creative pursuits that include music, theater and writing.

If you enjoy reading about interesting news, you might like the 3 O'Clock Stir from STLtoday.com. Sign up and you'll receive an email with unique stories of the day, every Monday-Friday, at no charge.
Sign up at <http://newsletters.stltoday.com>
