

Unitarian Universalist Small Group Ministry Network Website

Information Technology

Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Stony Brook, NY, May 2014

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Opening Words: The Answer is in Your Hands (Indian folk tale, adapted)

There was once a wise woman who lived by herself near a small village. Rumor had it that she could always accurately predict when the rains would come, or help heal a sick child with herbs, or calm angry neighbors and help them to resolve their fights and arguments. People came from all over the land to meet with her and seek her advice on matters both small and great. Her reputation was such that was said she was never wrong — not ever.

Some of the children of the village didn't believe that it was possible to always be right. Surely she could not know everything! They decided to test her knowledge. First they asked her to answer questions about the planets, the animals, and the world. No matter how hard the questions, she always answered correctly.

The children were amazed at her knowledge and learning and most were ready to stop testing the wise woman. However, one boy was determined to prove that the old woman couldn't know everything. Hatching a devious scheme, he told all of his friends to meet him at the woman's home the following afternoon so he could prove she was a faker.

All through the next day he hunted for a bird. Finally he caught a small songbird in a net. Holding it behind his back so no one could see what was in his hands, he walked triumphantly to the wise woman's home.

"Old woman!" he called. "Come and show us how wise you are!" The woman walked calmly to the door. "May I help you?" she simply asked. "You say you know everything — prove it — what am I holding behind my back?" the young boy demanded. The old woman thought for a moment. She could make out the faint sounds of a bird's wings rustling. "I do not say I know everything — for that would be impossible," she replied. "However, I do believe you are holding a bird in your hands."

The boy was furious. How could the woman have possibly known he had a bird? Thinking quickly he came up with a new scheme. He would ask the woman whether the bird was alive or dead. If the woman replied, "alive," he would crush it with his hands and prove her wrong. If she answered, "dead," on the other hand, he would pull the living bird from behind his back and allow it to fly away. Either way he would prove his point and the wise woman would be discredited.

"Very good," he called. "It is a bird. But tell me, is the bird I am holding alive or dead?" The wise woman paused for a long moment while the boy waited with anticipation for his opportunity to prove her wrong. Again the woman spoke calmly, "The answer, my young friend, is in your hands. The answer is in your hands."

Chalice Lighting and Silence

Covenant (optional)

Check-in

Topic Introduction

Information technology (IT) is the application of computers and telecommunications equipment to store, retrieve, transmit and manipulate data. The term applies most often to computers and computer networks, but it also includes such devices as televisions and telephones. Several industries are associated with information technology, including computer hardware, software, electronics, internet, telecom equipment, e-commerce and computer services.

Humans have been storing, retrieving, manipulating and communicating information since the Sumerians in Mesopotamia developed writing in about 3000 BC, but the term *information technology* in its modern sense first appeared in a 1958 article published in the *Harvard Business Review*. Based on the storage and processing technologies employed, the authors distinguished four distinct phases of IT development: pre-mechanical (3000 BC – 1450 AD), mechanical (1450–1840), electromechanical (1840–1940) and electronic (1940–present) (adapted from: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Information_technology). Since 1940, information of all kinds has become exponentially available and the devices that provide it have become exponentially smaller, more complex and more efficient.

Our ability to communicate with one another has changed especially dramatically. “Until the early 1990s, most cell phones were too big for pockets. Movies were unavailable on DVD until 1997. Google didn’t arrive until 1998. There was no Myspace (social network with music emphasis) until 2003, and YouTube (video-sharing) launched two years after that.” Teens used to communicate by email. Then Facebook (message exchange networking site) became the main channel of communication for teenagers, then phone texting, now Twitter (140 character text messages) and Snapchat (photo-messaging). Every year or two there is something completely new! Ten years is a long time in the electronic age (adapted from Colorado Dept. of Education)!

Data, information, knowledge and wisdom are all different things. Data are such things as sensations, facts, figures. They are independent units and atomic in nature. Information can be described alternately as organized data, the patterns that exist in data, or the underlying meaning of interrelated pieces of data. Knowledge is the ability to comprehend and use information. Wisdom is the ability to make the best use of knowledge. In this Sharing Circle session, we think together about how we use and manage information and the devices that bring it to us in our lives today.

Activity: Where Are We on the Continuum?

Facilitators: Ask members of your group to initial where they are on the five continuum lines on the sheet called “Where Are We on the Continuum?” and to circle the types of technology they use. When everyone has finished, hold up the chart and see if there are any clusters and/or patterns for the group as a whole. Remember that people will have more opportunities to share how they feel about technology in the questions for reflection section. For now try to direct the group to reflect on itself as whole.]

Quotations

Questions for group reflection:

1. What were the new technologies that were popular during your childhood and young adulthood? How did they change your family life and your own priorities and passions at the time?
2. In this age of iPods, laptops, tablets, kindles, smart phones, Palm Pilots, wide-screen TVs and iPhones what is your relationship with information technology? Share where you are on the continuums and which kinds of technology you use.
3. Can you tell a story about how the abundance of information available through new technology benefits you? How do you figure out which information is trustworthy? What kind of information do you contribute or pass on to others in the cyberworld?
4. How does your use of technology impact your relationships and/or your family life? Do you struggle to keep your use of technology from consuming too large a portion of your time? Do you use technology or does it use you?
5. What observations could you make about the influence of electronic technology on the lives of children you know? How is technology helping them become better human beings as they mature? Are they missing experiences you had at their age? Are they gaining something you couldn't?
6. Microsoft researcher Linda Stone claims that we have entered an age of “continuous partial attention.” Does your experience confirm that claim? Do you see other ways information technology is changing the way human beings interact with the world around them?
7. How do the cultural shifts you identified in the previous question enhance or impair your ability to live your life in the light of UU principles, theologies, and values? We still struggle to reconcile our use of *medical* technology with moral and ethical principles. How are we doing in that regard with *information* technology? [**Facilitators:** It might be helpful to have the principles visible on a poster or a handout]

8. What connections do you see between the story we read as our Opening Words and the topic of this Sharing Circle?

Likes and Wishes

Closing Words and Chalice Extinguishing

But today our very survival depends on our ability to stay awake, to adjust to new ideas, to remain vigilant and to face the challenge of change. The large house in which we live demands that we transform this world-wide neighborhood into a world – wide brotherhood (and sisterhood). Together we must learn to live as brothers (and sisters) or together we will be forced to perish as fools.

We must work passionately and indefatigably to bridge the gulf between our scientific progress and our moral progress. One of the great problems of (humankind) is that we suffer from a poverty of the spirit which stands in glaring contrast to our scientific and technological abundance. The richer we have become materially, the poorer we have become morally and spiritually. ~ Martin Luther King, Jr.

Quotations

It has become appallingly obvious that our technology has exceeded our humanity.
~ Albert Einstein

The typewriting machine, when played with expression, is no more annoying than the piano when played by a sister or near relation. ~ Oscar Wilde

Everybody gets so much information all day long that they lose their common sense.
~ Gertrude Stein

We are stuck with technology when what we really want is just stuff that works.
~ Arthur Clarke

First we thought the PC was a calculator. Then we found out how to turn numbers into letters with ASCII — and we thought it was a typewriter. Then we discovered graphics, and we thought it was a television. With the World Wide Web, we've realized it's a brochure. ~ Douglas Adams

Please, no matter how we advance technologically, please don't abandon the book. There is nothing in our material world more beautiful than the book. ~ Patti Smith

Computers are useless. They can only give you answers. ~ Pablo Picasso

There will come a time when it isn't 'They're spying on me through my phone' anymore. Eventually, it will be 'My phone is spying on me'. ~ Philip K Dick

Before you become too entranced with gorgeous gadgets and mesmerizing video displays, let me remind you that information is not knowledge, knowledge is not wisdom, and wisdom is not foresight. Each grows out of the other, and we need them all.
~ Arthur C. Clarke

We're born, we live for a brief instant, and we die. It's been happening for a long time. Technology is not changing it much - if at all. ~ Steve Jobs

Ethics change with technology. ~ Larry Niven

The technologies which have had the most profound effects on human life are usually simple. A good example of a simple technology with profound historical consequences is hay. Nobody knows who invented hay, the idea of cutting grass in the autumn and storing it in large enough quantities to keep horses and cows alive through the winter. All we know is that the technology of hay was unknown to the Roman Empire but was known to every village of medieval Europe. ~ Freeman Dyson

Where Are We On The Continuum?

Technology

Love it _____ Hate it

Totally ignorant _____ Master



Welcome it

Fear it

who needs it?

Give me



the latest



Circle the
you

types of technology



currently use

