

One-Minute Waltz

Text: Chopin's Minute Waltz

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In April, at the University of Pennsylvania campus, I happened upon the "60-Second Lectures." These speedy talks are given outdoors, by a series of U Penn professors, with the goal of rapidly sharing perspective on a variety of disciplines. While not all stay under one minute, they come close. I heard Prof. Jeffrey Kallberg, Music Department Chair, give his 60-second lecture on the Frederic Chopin piece we just heard. Chopin hated descriptive names for his music, however this one, *Minute Waltz*, seems apt. In this virtuosic piece, the rapid beginning, middle, and end of the musical progression mirrors Chopin's prolific life work. This prodigy was composing by age 7, and died at 39.

As I sat listening to the 60-Second Lecture, and the Minute Waltz itself, the speed of both reminded me of our fast-paced world. This is the quirky brain of ministers: we wander through life thinking about sermon topics. The speed lectures and rapid piano seemed to me to symbolize the lightening quick way we live in this 21st century. We may find ourselves in rounds of one-minute waltzes: all of *our* speed interactions, rapid electronic multi-tasking, the smartphone tap-tap-tap-ing into email or Internet, the 60-second voicemails, little

greetings that exit in bursts of time. And then, there are reactions to the one-minute tempo: such as the slow food movement, or the naysayers to *Twitter* and *Facebook*, even those who won't watch TV or read the newspaper, because it's all too much stimuli. There is tension in the tempo--while technology serves to move us faster and faster, and can be astonishingly useful, some human ones are getting vertigo.

I often hear a generational divide on these issues, and as a 50-something, I stand in the middle. Here are two generalizations, not true for all of course. My generation and older sometimes find the pace too fast and the gadgets too addictive. Younger generations generally live in constant contact with electronic connection, and tend to find the ways of interacting compelling and natural. There is a divide in vocabulary and knowledge, and sometimes a very puzzled view of the other side.

At All Souls, we have the whole range of ages, many youth all the way up to our Silver Souls, and I have been noting the differences between generations. Recently I was talking to a senior, and he quizzed me on the new electronic vocabulary. "What is a blog? What is that twitter thing? How can you have the Internet on your telephone?" When I described a few of the categories, and how I felt younger folks were clearly way more electronically adept, he paused and shook his head with some sadness. "Louise," he said, "what is wrong with young people that they think this is the only way to connect with others?" He was truly bemused, and worried for the welfare of some of the Young Souls! I would not put the question in exactly the same way, yet the

poignancy did ring true. We all yearn for human connection, the kind that may take an entire symphony of movements, and so often, we find ourselves in the unsatisfying one-minute waltz.

Here's an excerpt from a book review [You are Not a Gadget: A Manifesto](#), by Jaron Lanier:

It's not often that one of the creators of our new digital culture comes forward to say: I made a mistake, this is not what I intended. But Jaron Lanier, a pioneer in the invention of virtual reality, has done just that...

Lanier says there is still time to "promote alternate designs [of the Internet] that resonate with human-kindness." He is fighting for something "ineffable" in the human imagination and creativity; for us to see personhood as "a quest, a mystery, and a leap of faith."

These are not views normally expressed by computer scientists...yet Lanier dares to say the forbidden: that computers as we know them may be incapable of truly representing human thoughts and relationships.

(Ellen Ullman, Washington Post.)

One topic of Lanier's inquiry is the anxious stress of those, young or not, who feel the need to manage on-line reputations constantly. Lanier feels a sad example comes from people who brag about having thousands of friends on *Facebook*. He says that this friendship is true

only if “the idea of friendship is reduced.” Of course, most people do understand at a gut level that only a certain number of relationships can be maintained. Past that number, interaction is sporadic, and most likely shallow. A British anthropologist, Robin Dunbar, poses a theory that the number of individuals with whom a stable interpersonal relationship can be maintained is actually limited by the size of the brain’s neocortex. His theory, called “Dunbar’s number” is that this limit is 150. Yet on *Facebook*, which if you don’t know is an interactive collection of electronic contacts, the limit is 5000. *Facebook* took the noun “friend” and morphed it into a verb, so in “friending” people, an image, an illusion, of connection is created. One New York psychologist wryly observes this about his 2,894 *Facebook* friends:

[Friending] “sustains an illusion of closeness in a complex world of continuous partial attention...We get captured by Facebook’s algorithms. Every day 25 new people can march into your living room. I come from a failed Presbyterian youth,” he says, “and there was a part of me that first thought it was impolite not to respond. Then I realized I couldn’t put them all in a living room—I needed an amphitheater.” (Roger Fransecky, Washington Post,)

Keeping up with such a large inventory is time-consuming and relentless. It’s not just the decisions about who to “friend” or not to “friend,” it’s the never-ending supply of mundane and sometimes unremarkable information coming in about their daily lives. I loved

Gene Weingarten's column, called *Get outta my Face...book*. He wrote this:

I've pretty much given up on Facebook because—please don't take this the wrong way—I am tired of hearing about every tedious development in your banal, uneventful life. As it happens, I am currently squirting tepid whipped cream directly into my mouth from the can because my refrigerator has broken and this is the only source of nutrients I can find that has not yet spoiled, but you won't see that on my Facebook page, because I have too much respect for your time.

Another consequence of the constant flow of information comes via continuous access to it, in the form of smartphones. Maybe you are of the generation that doesn't quite know what they do, but you have probably seen many folks tethered to their Blackberries, Palm Pilots, or iPhones, thumbs and index fingers moving openly or surreptitiously. Some of you have the gadgets sitting next to you on the pew, checking in on your email during the choir anthem, taking a peek at a restaurant review for brunch during the sermon! I know you are out there. Physically you are present and in the room. However, mentally you are elsewhere every other minute. As one *Post* article put it, people begin "existing as bits of data pinging between cellphone towers." Smartphones make it possible to inhabit a digital world, while you are moving through the physical world, giving time and attention to information, rather than the flesh and blood around you.

I am all for the use of rapid information, and I understand many of ways it enriches our lives. And still, this one-minute waltz, shifting from spot to spot, provides a wealth of data--and can create poverty in deep connection. You may find out something every 60 seconds, and still not have a clue about the people who are right in front of you. In your life, is the technological connection taking the place of the human bond? Do you connect with data much more than flesh and blood, emotion, spirit? Just about everyone over 70 knows a deep truth: as you add on the decades, the consequences of your actions accumulate. By that stage in your life, you reap what you have sown. Deep family bonds and multi-dimensional friendships thrive only because you invest real time. Virtual time is a one-minute waltz, virtuosic yes, a little dizzy sometimes, and always fleeting.

A favorite poem by Marge Piercy reminds us that connection takes time, not the one-minute waltz, but much more music. I close with her words:

Connections are made slowly, sometimes they grow underground.

You cannot tell always by looking what is happening.

More than half the tree is spread out in the soil under your feet...

Weave real connections, create real nodes, build real houses.

Live a life you can endure: Make love that is loving.

*Live as if you liked yourself, and it may happen:
reach out, keep reaching out, keep bringing in.*

*This is how we are going to live for a long time:
not always, for every gardener knows
that after the digging, after the planting,
after the long season of tending and growth,
the harvest comes.*

Amen.