

CYBERSENSE

YOUR HEALTH IN A WIRELESS WORLD

WE LIVE, PERHAPS WITHOUT QUITE NOTICING, IN THE MIDST OF A GREAT EXODUS. Most of us, more or less, are on the trek, like it or not. Left behind is the old Earth, where good bodies were just the thing, and face-to-face communication was key. Back there, “reach out and touch someone” implied being at arms length, and “I’ll see you” meant just literally that. Where we are going now is “within.” Not however the deep sacred “within” of the saints and the sages, but rather a hastily constructed, profit-driven, furiously evolving, virtual “within” the marketing people like to call “i-life.” The “i” here stands for “Internet.” But as so many different devices embrace chips, we might also say “e-life”—“e” now for all things “electronic.” Because this new promised land comes to us increasingly via all sorts of electronic screens, speakers, and controllers—in everything from cars to coffee-makers.

The advantages, we are told, are huge—unprecedented in all recorded history. Well, for once, market-speak is right. Miniaturized, wireless computation is a nerd alchemist’s wet dream. It can make anything intelligent and hook it up to everything else. My i-phone IS awesome. It gets my email, browses, plays my favorite music, takes and displays photos, and more. Would I want to give up the ability to revise these words at a keystroke and shoot them off to Yoga Living for their edits before they ever emerge on unchangeable ink and paper? Not really. Similarly, a GPS on my dashboard is way better than trying to refold and read maps while driving.

I’ve worked intimately with computers most of my adult life. I’ve managed IT departments, built networks and databases, run businesses, and designed furniture on these machines. Wonders abound in this new “i-life,” truly. But there’s another side to the story. What’s glossed over so constantly in the market-speak is the fact that “i-life” is also increasingly dangerous to our mental, emotional, physical, and financial health.



Think about it a minute. Mostly what we do to participate in “i-life” is look, listen, and push a bewildering array of real or virtual buttons. Through them, sitting mostly always, we navigate a glowing, ghostly world of videos, aggressively animated ads, web stores, emails, instant messages, and so on. We’re challenged and augmented mentally, but our bodies and emotions go pretty much on hold. Our identities here, indeed our financial and legal realities, depend totally on numbers, license-keys, and strong passwords. We absolutely must remember them—guard them with our lives. But we must never write them down. There are more of them every month, and many are supposed to be changed (and so memorized) regularly. If someone else gets them, they can clean us out. Tiny devices, with a vast array of obscure functions, come and go in our lives before we can ever figure out more than a third of what they are supposed to do. And the next one works nothing like the last one. So the watch on my wrist that does everything still only tells me the time.

You see, whereas the old Earth spent eons evolving the “whole person” to fit real life, the new “within” excludes all but a small, mostly mental, set of skills. Despite its

splendid achievements, i-life is in many important ways antithetical to holistic health. Muscle tone, balance and coordination, aerobic capacity, face-to-face social interaction skills, emotional intelligence, and spiritual depth—all count for little in i-life. They tend to atrophy. How healthy, challenging, or enriching is a life consisting mostly of sitting, viewing, pushing buttons, eating, driving, viewing, pushing more buttons, and on and on. The question that faces us is, well, if we cannot (and might not want to) avoid this migration, how then do we participate selectively? How do we stay safe and productive in the virtual world, and yet whole, inter-connected, and on the path in the real one?

I’d like to write a set of articles on this topic, and call the answers we come up with something like “cybersense.” Cybersense is awareness that allows you to keep a foot in both worlds and not lose your balance. Another term for it might be “digital hygiene.” But that’s used more often to mean geeky things like firewalls, virus protection, and how well you organize your files. I might talk geek to you in places, but not very much. That kind of thing is available elsewhere. I’m more interested here in exploring health and spirituality issues not so often discussed. For instance, next issue, I want to compare the impact on the lives of children and adults of large amounts of reading (print media) versus large amounts of viewing (video). Ultimately, the health differences are profound and far-reaching. Reading builds certain capacities, whereas video, especially these days (being mostly eye-candy)—and destroys them.

As you no doubt know, the word “yoga” arises from a Sanskrit root meaning “to yoke together.” Perhaps, caught between two worlds as we are, we need new kinds of “yoking.” Maybe the “yamas” (restrictions) and “niyamas” (observances) can be extended in ways that will keep us safe and well in both worlds. Yoga is in many ways the ultimate “high-touch” activity. But “high-tech” is proving to be significantly antithetical to “high-touch.” Maybe it’s time to talk about that. ▲