

RECONNECT

DISCUSSION GUIDE

Spiritual Restoration in Beloved Community



4 SESSIONS

ED CYZEWSKI

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IDEAS FOR USING THIS DISCUSSION GUIDE

The *Reconnect Discussion Guide* has been designed with groups and individuals in mind who want to spend some time further discussing or pondering the ideas in *Reconnect*.

This discussion guide is broken up into four separate sessions for group discussion over a four-week period. Just substitute the word *session* with *week*, and you'll be ready to go. The chapters from *Reconnect: Spiritual Restoration from Digital Distraction* show up in the same order as the book. Each session in the study guide begins with a simple introduction to the ideas discussed in the corresponding chapters of *Reconnect*.

For a single session study, consider selecting one quote and two discussion questions from each session.

I have pulled many of the longer quotes from the book and added more context from the original source when helpful. Finally, I'll wrap up with a few questions for discussion and next steps to consider putting into practice.

Thanks for reading *Reconnect!*

—Ed Cyzewski

SESSION 1

DO WE KNOW PARADISE IS ALL AROUND US?

A mother's interaction with her son in a coffee shop served as one of the catalysts for this book—rather, I should say it was her lack of interaction. While parenting ideals swirled in my mind after the birth of our first son, this mother had better things to do than talk to her son, who bounced around in his seat in a bid for her attention. She held a phone up right in front of his face more or less, tapping and swiping like a zombie. I imagined that her phone appeared to have sprouted arms and legs, replacing him in the moment.

Perhaps she had something important to do on her phone. Perhaps she was a disinterested babysitter who was just trying to get through the day. There are plenty of explanations that could make that situation a little less awful than what I imagined in my mind. Yet, as my own children grew up and more or less sucked the energy out of me like tiny noisy batteries that spilled food on the floor regularly, I began turning to my phone and tablet more frequently. When I needed to “disconnect” from the demands of parenting, my screen became a refuge of sorts. As often as I noticed that trend, I struggled to stop myself.

While I adopted my smartphone for accessing directions, accessing my email and social media while at writing events, and just generally keeping up with my writing friends who were using apps on their phones, I found that it became a drain on my time. As my stress and anxiety increased, my digital devices and social media became havens of a sort. Despite my initial designs for my phone and social media, I couldn't grapple with the ways they sucked me in. I didn't feel that I had seen this coming, and I began to wonder if the woman in the café who ignored her son felt the same way as well.

The following quote from Cal Newport sets the stage for discussing the tensions between digital formation and spiritual formation in a nonjudgmental manner. We don't start using our phones for bad reasons, and we're often drawn to them for good reasons—such as a desire to connect with others or to remain informed. Newport suggests that misuse of social media is never part of our intentions.

QUOTE FROM THE INTRODUCTION

Professor and author Cal Newport observes, “We added new technologies to the periphery of our experience for minor reasons, then woke one morning to discover that they had colonized the core of our daily life. We didn't, in other words, sign up for the digital world in which we're currently entrenched; we seem to have stumbled backward into it.”

Newport adds, “These technologies as a whole have managed to expand beyond the minor roles for which we initially adopted them. Increasingly, they dictate how we behave and how we feel, and somehow coerce us to use them more than we think is healthy, often at the expense of other activities we find more valuable. What's making us uncomfortable, in other words, is this feeling of losing control.”¹

¹ Cal Newport, *Digital Minimalism: Choosing a Focused Life in a Noisy World* (New York: Penguin Random House, 2019), 6.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

Describe a time when you noticed someone misusing a smartphone such that they ignored someone or missed something important.

Describe a moment when you've misused your smartphone and what you would like to change about it.

What are some of the emotions you feel when you reflect on your general smartphone use and the prospect of making changes to it?

Why did you adopt a particular digital device, such as a smartphone, in your life?

Consider your reasons for adopting this device and then ask yourself the following questions:

Does your current usage of this device match your original intentions of it?

What is the one thing you would like to change about your digital device usage?

What is keeping you from making that change?

NEXT STEPS TO RECONNECT

Try to stop at least once today to ask whether you've overlooked paradise.

Is there something beautiful and worth noticing that's been right in front of you all along?

SESSION 2

HOW DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY SHAPES US

When I considered my struggles to limit my social media and smartphone use, I made the mistake of equating my failures with a kind of moral struggle that fed shame and guilt. I blamed my overuse on my lack of discipline, thinking that I had all the agency required to make good choices with my technology use. But the more I learned about smartphone and social media app design, the more I realized that technology was shaping my behavior in ways that I could not imagine. There's always a measure of agency in the choices we make each day, but failing to understand addiction and the design of apps and devices means a lot of folks are carrying guilt and shame for no good reason.

If you want to make more space in your life for family, spiritual practices, work, or leisure activities such as reading, exercising, or hobbies, there's a good chance that your smartphone will cut into your time and attention. Simply limiting your time on a highly addictive device that holds highly addictive apps isn't a simple choice. I was most surprised to find in my research that the very people who designed these apps and their addicting features couldn't resist them. In other words, they knew that they were essentially manipulating themselves to feel a certain way and to indulge in certain actions, but they couldn't resist their own creations. Leah Pearlman, a former Facebook employee discussed below, had to hire someone to manage her Facebook account for her because she was so addicted to the social feedback loop.

My goal in writing *Reconnect* isn't to stop people from using their phones, apps, or social media. My goal is to return as much agency and control as possible to people who have been largely blindsided by extremely useful and beautifully designed apps that have also manipulated what they crave, what they value, and how they spend their time.

The odds for us in regulating our social media usage aren't great. The engineers behind these apps describe thousands of engineers and advanced supercomputers teaming up with psychologists specializing in habit formation to make their devices, apps, and social media networks as addicting as possible. If so many people are working to capture our time and attention, then we will need more than willpower to limit our use of social media and digital devices that have more or less rewired our ability to sit still, to enjoy silence, and to remain content with what we have.

As you read the quotes from technology insiders, consider how their experiences overlap with your own. Finally, you can marvel at just how creepily prescient Thomas Merton was in the 1960s when the first computers were just being developed.

QUOTES FROM CHAPTER 1

Leah Pearlman, the cocreator of the red notification button on Facebook, literally had to stop using Facebook because the red notification button was too appealing and became linked to her self-esteem and daily moods (as of this writing, these notifications appear as a red bubble on top of a bell on the Facebook home page). Although Pearlman knew how the notification works, she realized how dependent she had become. "When I need validation—I go to check Facebook," she said. "I'm feeling lonely, 'Let me check my phone.' I'm feeling insecure, 'Let me check my phone.' . . . I noticed that I would post something that I used to post and the 'like' count would be

way lower than it used to be.” Pearlman didn’t hesitate to use the word *addiction* in assessing herself: “Suddenly, I thought I’m actually also kind of addicted to the feedback.”²

Tristan Harris went on to enjoy a successful career at Google before raising alarms about the ethics of design being used to manipulate users. Harris shared in an interview how YouTube manages to hook us, even if we try to limit ourselves:

I’m just going to watch this one video and then somehow, that’s not what happens. You wake up from a trance three hours later and you say, “What the h*** just happened?” And it’s because you didn’t realize you had a supercomputer pointed at your brain. So when you open up that video you’re activating Google’s billions of dollars of computing power and they’ve looked at what has ever gotten 2 billion human animals to click on another video. And it knows way more about what’s going to be the perfect chess move to play against your mind. If you think of your mind as a chessboard, and you think you know the perfect move to play—I’ll just watch this one video. But you can only see so many moves ahead on the chessboard. But the computer sees your mind and it says, “No, no, no. I’ve played a billion simulations of this chess game before on these other human animals watching YouTube,” and it’s going to win. . . . So it’s not that we’re completely losing human agency and you walk in to YouTube and it always addicts you for the rest of your life and you never leave the screen. But everywhere you turn on the internet there’s basically a supercomputer pointing at your brain, playing chess against your mind, and it’s going to win a lot more often than not.³

QUOTES RELATED TO CHAPTER 2

Sean Parker, the founding president of Facebook, told a conference in Philadelphia that he was “something of a conscientious objector” to social media:

The thought process that went into building these applications, Facebook being the first of them . . . was all about: “How do we consume as much of your time and conscious attention as possible?” That means that we need to sort of give you a little dopamine hit every once in a while, because someone liked or commented on a photo or a post or whatever. And that’s going to get you to contribute more content and that’s going to get you . . . more likes and comments.⁴

Former Facebook executive Chamath Palihapitiya:

It’s a social-validation feedback loop . . . exactly the kind of thing that a hacker like myself would come up with, because you’re exploiting a vulnerability in human psychology. The inventors, creators—me, Mark [Zuckerberg], Kevin Systrom on Instagram, all of these people—understood this consciously. And we did it anyway.

The short-term, dopamine-driven feedback loops that we have created are destroying how society works. No civil discourse, no cooperation; misinformation, mistruth. . . . This is a global problem. It

2 Hilary Andersson, “Social Media Apps Are ‘Deliberately’ Addictive to Users,” BBC, July 4, 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/technology-44640959>.

3 Yuval Noah Harari and Tristan Harris, “When Tech Knows You Better Than You Know Yourself,” interview by Nicholas Thompson, *Wired*, October 4, 2018, <https://www.wired.com/story/artificial-intelligence-yuval-noah-harari-tristan-harris/>.

4 Solon, Olivia, “Ex-Facebook president Sean Parker: site made to exploit human ‘vulnerability’” *The Guardian*. November 9, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2017/nov/09/facebook-sean-parker-vulnerability-brain-psychology>.

is eroding the core foundations of how people behave by and between each other. . . . I can control my decision, which is that I don't use that s***. I can control my kids' decisions, which is that they're not allowed to use that s***.⁵

QUOTE FROM CHAPTER 3

Ready-made, daily affirmation from friends, family, and even complete strangers can make it difficult, if not impossible, to give up a social media affirmation hub like Instagram or Twitter—although services like Facebook, YouTube, and Snapchat offer many similar quandaries for users seeking affirmation. You could get “amazing feedback” at any moment if you keep checking, keep posting, and then keep checking. This feedback loop runs counter to the vision for contentment offered by Merton:

In order to settle down in the quiet of our own being we must learn to be detached from the results of our own activity. We must withdraw ourselves, to some extent, from the effects that are beyond our control and be content with the good will and the work that are the quiet expression of our inner life. We must be content to live without watching ourselves live, to work without expecting any immediate reward, to love without an instantaneous satisfaction, and to exist without any special recognition.⁶

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

Have you felt addicted to the feedback and affirmation of social media?

How has your smartphone use factored into your insecurities, desires, guilt, or other feelings?

How have your relationships with the people closest to you changed because of social media and smartphone use?

What are some of the positive and negative effects of social media on the young people and teens in your circles? Does one particular story or situation stand out in your mind?

Consider your reasons for using social media. List some of the good reasons to use social media and some of the less helpful reasons to use it. How do your intentions and emotional state change the experience of using social media?

How does social media affect your ability to be quiet and still?

⁵ Quoted in Alex Hern, “Never Get High on Your Own Supply”—Why Social Media Bosses Don't Use Social Media,” January 23, 2018, *Guardian*, <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2018/jan/23/never-get-high-on-your-own-supply-why-social-media-bosses-dont-use-social-media>.

⁶ Thomas Merton, *No Man Is an Island* (New York: Mariner Books, 2002), 127.

Reflect on the ways the immediate affirmation and short-lived satisfaction of social media use has shown up in your life.

Considering your life before your smartphone and after your smartphone, what kinds of changes have you noticed in yourself?

What do you miss about times when you didn't have a smartphone or social media?

NEXT STEPS TO RECONNECT

List the three things that are most important to you right now.

List a few ways that your smartphone or social media may interfere with those priorities.

Share how you can mitigate the detrimental aspects of technology in the pursuit of these priorities.

SESSION 3

HOW TO MAKE SPACE FOR SPIRITUAL RESTORATION

Whenever I mention on social media the ways that my smartphone distracts me from prayer, I can always count on at least one comment along these lines: “Well, I use my phone to pray!” I understand where such a well-intentioned comment comes from, and I certainly never want to make anyone feel judged by my discussion of digital formation versus spiritual formation. In fact, I have used my phone for prayer at times.

The tension here often comes back to our struggle to spot the downsides of a technology that can be used for good. There is no denying that apps can help us pray to a certain extent, but there is no replacing silent stillness before God, a moment of meditation on a psalm that has taken root in your mind, or the earnest prayer of faith that trusts God with a heavy burden. We have never needed apps for such prayers, and the interruptions of our phones as well as the addictive nature of checking our them repeatedly can make it difficult for these sorely needed disciplines in prayer to take root in our lives.

Cal Newport talks about the “any benefit” fallacy, in which the negative aspects of something may outweigh the positive aspects, but if there is any benefit we can find, then we may overlook the negatives. We could say that the good is the enemy of the best. I’m grateful that people are using apps to pray, but can they also pray in silence without thoughts filling their minds or without the distraction of checking their phones?

The silence and focus of the church and the simplicity of spiritual practices in the Christian tradition are vitally important for our spiritual vitality. Our priority should be preserving the spiritual practices that can heal our souls, keep us connected with God, and empower us to love our neighbors. Our phones and social media apps are designed to occupy as much of our time and attention as possible with quick hits of affirmation and connection. When are we able to disconnect from our phones long enough to be fully present for God so that we can invest in the slow, long-term disciplines of prayerful attentiveness to a loving and present God? Spiritual formation is often a slow process, an evolution of sorts, and we won’t have the quick hits of progress that social media has trained us to expect. Our phones can help us pray at times, but they can also make prayer extremely difficult. This is the tension we have to consider as we review the quotes in this session and discuss their implications below.

QUOTES FROM CHAPTER 4

Bob Carey, chair of the department of communication and new media at Gardner-Webb University in Boiling Springs, North Carolina, spoke about the quandary of using social media. “Simply opening an Instagram or Snapchat account isn’t enough,” he said. “Ministers must study the platforms and how they work. . . . If Instagram is the chosen platform for connecting with youth, churches and ministries should understand how hashtags work and seek to post relevant photos and videos.” Carey even resorted to great commission language in his description of social media investment by churches. “I encourage you to count the cost,” Carey said. “It’s going to take time and effort to do this.”⁷

7 Jeff Brumley, “Churches Must Count the Cost of Pursuing Youth on Social Media,” *Baptist News Global*, June 19, 2018, <https://baptistnews.com/article/churches-must-count-the-cost-of-pursuing-youth-on-social-media/>.

Writing before the rise of digital technology, Howard Thurman noted that a time of quiet preparation was essential for prayer and held out hope that the church could provide that badly needed sacred space:

Perhaps, as important as prayer itself, is the “readying” of the spirit for the experience. In such “readying” a quiet place is very important if not altogether mandatory. In the noise of our times such a place may be impossible to find. One of the great services that the Christian church can render to the community is to provide spells and spaces of quiet for the world-weary men and women whose needs are so desperate.⁸

QUOTE FROM CHAPTER 5

The then archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams shared:

Contemplation is very far from being just one kind of thing Christians do: it is the key to prayer, liturgy, art and ethics, the key to the essence of a renewed humanity that is capable of seeing the world and other subjects in the world with freedom—freedom from self-oriented acquisitive habits. . . . To put it boldly, contemplation is the only ultimate answer to the unreal and insane world that our financial systems and our advertising culture and our chaotic and unexamined emotions encourage us to inhabit. To learn contemplative practice is to learn what we need so as to live truthfully and honestly and lovingly.⁹

QUOTES FROM CHAPTER 6

Thomas Merton notes:

I cannot discover my “meaning” if I try to evade the dread which comes from first experiencing my meaninglessness! . . . One reason why our meditation never gets started is perhaps that we never make this real, serious return to the center of our own nothingness before God. Hence we never enter into the deepest reality of our relationship with him.¹⁰

Martin Laird writes the following about the challenges of releasing distracting thoughts:

The practice of contemplation is not an attempt to have no thoughts. This only serves to build up tension in the body and keep us forever checking to see if we’re having any thoughts. This in turn increases the momentum of reactive mind and the lifestyles born of it (their numbers are legion). The practice is returning and returning and returning, without a speck of any expectation of results (mercifully, results are often kept out of our sight; otherwise we would be forever journaling about them). Practice gradually trains the attention and grounds us more solidly in our bodies, increasing our ability to be where our bodies are at any given moment.¹¹

8 Howard Thurman, *Essential Writings* (New York: Orbis Books, 2006), 57.

9 Quoted in Martin Laird, *An Ocean of Light: Contemplation, Transformation, and Liberation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 12.

10 Thomas Merton, *Contemplative Prayer* (New York: Image Books, 1969), 47, 48.

11 Laird, *An Ocean of Light*, 67.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

What have been the benefits of social media and smartphone use in your Christian community?

What have been the costs of social media and smartphone use in your Christian community?

Before writing *Reconnect*, I asked church leaders and attendees what they would like to change about their social media use, and all noted they wished they used it more. Having read about digital formation in *Reconnect*, what do you think of that now?

What has your experience been with silent prayer, contemplation, or centering prayer?

Considering Rowan Williams's statement about contemplation, do you think silent prayer could help counter the digital consumer culture of today?

In what ways can silent prayer and contemplation help you treat others with more compassion and loving empathy?

How do you respond to Thomas Merton's quote about our nothingness before God? Is there hope or freedom on the other side of this kind of challenging reflection?

Martin Laird writes about the ways expectations can get in the way of contemplative prayer. What expectations do you currently have for prayer? What would it look like for you to let go of them?

Part of the shift from digital formation to spiritual formation is to return ourselves to a greater awareness of our bodies and the present moment. How can this "return to your body" help you pray?

NEXT STEPS TO RECONNECT

Where do you think silence and quiet spiritual reflection could fit into your life right now?

SESSION 4

PRACTICES FOR SPIRITUAL RESTORATION

Drawing bad-looking pears isn't helping me pray better in a direct way, but these unshapely pears have played a major role in my mental and spiritual restoration. As I look back at the ways that I've reconnected with God, my pear drawings served as a crucial step toward a more serious embrace of art and creativity that has been good for my mind and my soul. At the very least, I'm on social media and my digital devices a lot less because I'm posing pears in various positions, sketching them badly, layering pastels with great trepidation, wiping smudges from every possible surface, and fretting over the ways my blended colors are failing to come together.

When I started working on *Reconnect*, I spent some time each weekend doodling with charcoal pencils. As I wrapped up the edits, I had a few inexpensive pastel sets on hand, and they became a vital part of my weekly moments of solitude where I also journaled and spent some time in still quiet before God. As someone who works on his computer all week and has gradually weaned himself off his smartphone and social media, the tactile experiences of creating art, reading books, and journaling are vitally important for keeping me grounded before God and reminding myself how good it can feel to disconnect from my devices for an extended time.

QUOTES FROM CHAPTER 7

I don't think I would last very long in my opposition to digital formation if I didn't have a clear path toward spiritual practices and the freedom and peace God offers. In fact, digital formation derives so much of its power from our unintentional, even unthinking, use. If we are just passing time or disconnecting from a stressful moment, we aren't really addressing the deeper needs of our souls and are missing out on better ways to spend our time.

If we hope to remain grounded in God's love and mercy for our sake and for the sake of others, then we need to recognize when and how we need to withdraw from the disruption and fragmentation of technology and social media. This withdrawal is ultimately for the sake of others. As Thomas Merton wrote about the third- and fourth-century desert fathers and mothers: "They knew that they were helpless to do any good for others as long as they floundered about in the wreckage. But once they got a foothold on solid ground, things were different. Then they had not only the power but even the obligation to pull the whole world to safety after them."¹²

Consider that Henri Nouwen advises us to "fashion our own desert where we can withdraw every day, shake off our compulsions, and dwell in the gentle healing presence of our Lord."¹³ Perhaps one way to shake off our compulsions and the pull of distraction in a time of weakness is to set up blocks and limitations on our use of digital devices and apps. We could use blocking apps, delete distracting apps from our smartphones, or use timers to track our usage to better preserve the space we need, especially when life grows difficult and we may be more inclined to overuse or misuse our devices and apps.

¹² Thomas Merton, *Wisdom of the Desert* (New York: New Directions, 1960), 23.

¹³ Henri J. M. Nouwen, *The Way of the Heart: Connecting with God through Prayer, Wisdom, and Silence* (New York: Seabury, 1981), 30.

QUOTES FROM CHAPTER 8

Writer Madeleine L'Engle: "Our truest response to the irrationality of the world is to paint or sing or write, for only in such response do we find truth."¹⁴

Philosopher Jacques Ellul: "If you have to gather people together and lead them in order to show them what to do, everything is lost."¹⁵

Author Philip Thompson: "Merton believed we could restore our true selves amidst the diminishment of the technological world. The restoration would include sane forms of work, appropriate small-scale technologies, the encouraging of crafts, a tapping into the restorative possibilities of nature, and learning the lessons of the solitary. If we pursued these possibilities with wisdom, we could recover our connection to a divine reality and promote a new balance in our lives."¹⁶

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

What is the "wreckage" that you need to leave behind, even for just a few minutes, this week in order to be more aware of God?

What is keeping you from silent prayer and solitude?

How do you determine to spend your time each day?

Where do you keep your smartphone while in bed, eating a meal, traveling, spending time with friends/family, or working? What is one change you could make to that?

What are some ways that digital technology has "diminished" you and the people you know?

14 Madeline L'Engle, *The Rock That Is Higher: Story as Truth* (Colorado Springs: WaterBrook Press, 1993), 220.

15 Jacques Ellul, "New Hope for the Technological Society: An Interview with Jacques Ellul," interview by Berta Sichel, *ETC: A Review of General Semantics* 40, no. 2 (July 1, 1983): 196.

16 Philip M. Thompson, *Returning to Reality: Thomas Merton's Wisdom for a Technological Age* (Cambridge, UK: Lutterworth Press, 2013), 86.

Why would Merton think of things like sane forms of work, appropriate small-scale technologies, crafts, and nature as part of a restorative program for humanity to recover our connection with divine reality?

NEXT STEPS TO RECONNECT

List your unplugged/analog activities. How much time have you given them this week? Compare that time to the time spent on your smartphone (you can check under the screen time tracker in your phone's settings) and consider how your phone affects the way you spend your time. What would you like to change this week?

Thanks for reading *Reconnect!*

Don't forget to leave a brief review (even 2-3 sentences) on Amazon and Goodreads!