

“Our Godward Journey”
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I love reading Thomas Friedman books. I don't know if any of you have read any of them, but his latest one is called “Thank You for Being Late.” I was thinking, “What in the world does that mean?” I started reading it. It talked about the big transitional times in history and - in our current affairs situation - we are in a very big change in the life of our world that technology has brought about.

Thomas Friedman said that 2007 was one of the most transformative years in the history of our world - and I missed it. I was there, [it] seemed fine to me, and all of a sudden it has come and gone, and I had no idea what had changed.

Now maybe you are kind of like me - you are a little daft in the moment - and missed it; so I will restate to you what exactly we missed: Steve Jobs, in 2007, stood at the Marconi Center in San Francisco on January 9, 2007, to announce that Apple had reinvented the mobile phone. Now that may just seem like a little thing, but it has changed everything for us, as a people. This new phone would have no buttons. Its software could do everything. It would be the best phone, the best media player, [have] the best access to the World Wide Web that you would ever find - and it came to pass.

There are vintage years for wine and there are vintage years in the history of our world and 2007 was the vintage year for us. It changed the world, and here is what changed: In 2007, storage capacity exploded. It was the beginning of the iCloud, and all of those other clouds, where everything could be stored, which gave us the ability to hold on to, both as individuals and as corporations, vast sums of information. It allowed us to have what we have now with apps. It allows us to control and hold so much more information than we had ever had before.

September of 2006 - and what boomed in 2007 - was the beginning of Facebook and the world has never been the same since - for better and worse. In 2007, this micro-blogging company that started up, called Twitter. We might not have the same President if it were not for 2007 and Twitter, because he had made such a way of communicating through Twitter.

In late 2006 - and [it] boomed in 2007 - Google brought something called Youtube and now we get to watch cat videos forever and ever. [Laughter] It launched Android, to try to keep up with Apples' IOS systems. In 2007 libraries changed, and Barnes and Noble ceased to be the place that everyone hung out, because that was the year that Amazon came out with their eBook, Kindle. It changed everything.

In late 2006 the Internet had changed so that now over one billion people were using the worldwide web. That was a tipping point, because in that moment so many people around the globe were using the Internet that we became truly a global society, in ways that we had never been before. It changed the way we buy things. It changed the way we communicate. We stopped being a place where small towns had small things, and anyone anywhere could get what everyone else in larger metropolitan cities had. The change was amazing.

One of the greatest changes was one of the most complex: In 2007, the Semantic Analysis and Integeneration Department at IBM invented a cognitive computer called “Watson” and in that cognitive computer was the expectation that the power of the microchips would double roughly every two years. As they doubled, cognitive power within machines would continue to grow and develop, so that now machines could learn and repeat and change so much about the way we live in our world. Machines would interact with us in amazing and interesting ways - and now it’s in many of our homes.

For example [Scott addressed the interactive machine] Alexa: “Good morning.” (She replied, “good morning,”) He [Scott] had visited Jon and Sherryl McAvoy. They had an Alexa, and were playing with it, and he [Scott] told McAvoy that he had to have this toy, said it was more fun! Scott talked to Alexa a few more times during this part of the sermon, and she replied. Scott asked Alexa what the weather conditions were. She said, “Right now in Des Moines, it is 44 degrees and cloudy skies. Today’s forecast is clouds and showers, with a high of 54 degrees and a low of 44 degrees.”

[Scott speaking:] I haven’t asked her this one yet: “Alexa, what is the weather in Timbuktu?” [Alexa replied,] “Currently in Timbuktu, it is 104 degrees with a few clouds. The low will be 71 degrees.” You can get just about anything anywhere and you don’t have to raise a finger - it’s all there.

The reason I go to this is to explain this was not even possible in 2006. Can you imagine what it will be like in 2026 - in just 10 years? If you watch the [TV] commercials you can turn on your sprinklers and chase 16-year-old boys off your lawn. (I was 10 years too late for that one.) [Laughter.] All of these things, some of them are fun and some are a little scary,

I don’t know if you watched [this] on the news a couple of weeks ago: Tesla has cars that don’t need drivers. They can set it all up [program it]. They had the first Tesla truck (and if I’m not mistaken it was a beer truck) that drove from Baltimore to Washington, DC, all on its own, loaded it, pulled out, got onto the road and even backed up to have it dropped off, without a human being driving at any step along the fifty some mile route.

Now in another 10-15 years will anybody be driving trucks again? Uber is already spending millions upon millions of dollars, because if they can get rid of having to pay people to drive, and they will have their own cars doing it through Tesla, it will save so much on personnel, and they will be able to pocket all of the money. But what will that do for us? How will human beings find their place in this world? It can be very frightening if we are not careful and if we don’t plan ahead.

But there are ethical dilemmas. Technology is changing about every 18 months. It is changing everything again, and multiplying and doubling what it can do every 18 months. But, it takes about 15 years for human beings to catch up to what technology is able to do. We are always behind. We are even further behind in the way we look at ethics. We haven’t even started to evaluate what the ethical values are of having these kinds of machines take over parts of our jobs, and what we will have to do to provide jobs, income and opportunity for human beings. Ethically we are so far behind the scale.

I will give you another example: Because of the expansion in 2007, now in 2015, personal genetics, in a company called Veritas Genetics, began offering the opportunity to get your entire genome sequence. For just \$1000.00, you can find out about every part of yourself - your history, your health, where your future problems are going to be. But we haven't defined ethically whether or not insurance companies will get access to that information, and decide to keep or cut us, based on what our genome says will happen to us. We haven't ethically evaluated what will happen if we can evaluate the genetic predisposition of infants right after conception and what that means. We haven't ethically evaluated all of these things that are multiplying so much faster. We are just not keeping up, and it is only going to increase the space and double every 18 to 24 months. How in the world are we going to keep up?

One hundred years ago it took literally 100 years for the world to double in its change; now it's every 18-24 months. Where does it stop and what will our children see when they are our age? Where and who will be the ethical voices to change and organize how we respond to all of that change?

Now why I'm describing this, is while I have a great deal of fun playing with this thing with Jon McAvoy, sometimes the fun of all of the technology gets in the way of what it was intended to do: make our lives easier. It doesn't.

How many times did you have a teenager, over the weekend, who communicated beside you and not too you? Because in 2007 you had Twitter. You have the ability to text in ways that now are so much greater than they were even 10 years ago. How do we get people to relate to each other - because they are losing that ability?

I heard a talk (I think it was a TED talk) not long ago, that talked about the fact that there is a relationship between young people waiting to get married in their 30s now, when it had been in their early to mid-20s, just 30 years ago. In part [it's] because of technology. They [younger people] don't have the same ability to relate on the same personal level. They relate in a more *technological* way that isn't as intimate. It takes younger people longer to know how to take the next step in their journey of intimacy with one another. And that may continue to expand, until we figure out how to relate to the technology we have, and to get it working for us instead of us having to work on our technology.

You go into the Church office, and it is amazing how close we hear un-Christian things coming out of the mouth of one of the most Christian men I know: Ken Arentson. [Laughter.] The man is truly a gift to all of us, but he is not a gift to technology. [Laughter.] If it can be broke, he can break it. When we want to try something new, we try to find a way for him to go visit somewhere else. But, joking aside, we have talked about how often we have spent more time figuring out and getting the technology to work, than if we had just done it with a pen and paper.

Technology is running us. Now it is getting easier - because there was a time when using a computer required a master's degree actually in computer science, in order to use that computer, and to speak that computer language. I had to learn Lotus. A year and a half later I didn't have to know Lotus anymore - a most frustrating year in my life. Maybe it will get easier. Now that same person who had to have a master's degree in computer science to

run a computer can be an 18-month-old sitting waiting for their order to come up at Applebee's, playing on mom and dad's cell phone. We have all seen it.

The person can be illiterate, not know how to read, but know how to use that phone. Maybe technology will get good enough that we won't have to fuss with it and pray. It [has] made me more of a Christian, because every time we use it [technology], Ken and I are praying up a storm before the church service starts, because we know something computerized is going to break down.

Now, why am I saying all of this? Because this stuff has gotten in the way of our journey with God far too often. It has kept us from learning how to relate to each other, as well [as with] especially the younger people in our society. It has allowed us to be more mean-spirited because we don't have to take responsibility for what we put on line, and it has caused us to believe there is a God who will make all of this so powerful and meaningful that we don't have to worry about the one true God.

Soon, because of technology, we will be able to live to be 170 years old - within another generation. Another TED talk. I think I heard that. We may get to the point where we can live hundreds of years in these bodies. But, has anyone taken the time to ethically ask, Should we? Do we want to? What does that do to the world we are in? Is this really where I want to be for the next 300 years? Most of the elderly people that Ken and I are with right before they pass away, are ready to go, and if they have been here too long, as you know, they usually ask, "Why am I still here?"

Do we really want all of this technology to keep us from God? I don't know, but I know we need to keep asking the questions, we need to keep pushing the ethicists, and not just keep inventing without the opportunity to evaluate. We need to finally trust that God will bring a peace that is not controlled by this, but is controlled by the ability of our human hearts and minds to provide love, care and hope. We shouldn't be scared of these tools, and we should use them - and we need to keep up - if nothing else to know what our children and grandchildren are doing right now.

But, we need to remember who is in charge. We are in charge of the technology and God is in charge of us. When we do that, our pilgrimage will be on the right road to the right place.

May God bless us, and may God call us to evaluate and take responsibility through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen