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Is virtual life really life giving?

Carol Meyer | Dec. 21, 2010 Eco Catholic

The Sammy Cahn Christmas song, made popular by Frank Sinatra and the Carpenters, may have stated, ?It?s that time of year when the world falls in love,? but we all know it?s that time of year when we get new electronics! It?s not the time for sleigh rides, walking in a winter wonderland, or roasting chestnuts over an open fire, but for spending hours with our new ipods, cell phones that can do everything except cook dinner, video and internet games, big-screen TVs, our Wii, and much more.

Wow, isn?t this technology wonderful? Hours of blissful amusement to wile away these long winter days when we can?t get outside. How inane is jumping rope, roller-skating, building with Legos, and playing family board games when we can enter the exciting and unlimited realm of virtual reality. Whoa! Let?s put on the brakes for a minute and examine whether this trend of spending more and more time interacting with machines and a fantasy world is really good for us.

I?m not sure any worthy parent just LOVES having their children watch TV, text, or be on the internet for hours on end. We all instinctively recognize that that much passive, second-hand, largely motionless, often unreal interaction with life lacks sometime vital, and may indeed be dangerous to body and soul. And it?s obvious that it doesn?t produce happiness or we wouldn?t have so many depressed young people running around, well, er, sitting around.

My granddaughter Taylor, 13, planned to have a friend spend the night last week, but then they decided it would be more fun at the friend?s house because she had more ?stuff,? (translate that into movies, video games, etc.). Our lowly ping pong table and dart board hardly measured up. After a time of laughter and creative interaction at our home, off they went to greener pastures. The next day I heard it was no fun. Apparently gizmos could not make up for a lack of family harmony. Imagine that.

I truly lament the loss of connection with the natural world by today?s young people, and often, adults as well. But at least many of us older people have had it in the past. I wouldn?t trade my childhood on the farm for all the money in the world. Tramping barefoot in the mud, jumping on the hay in the barn, climbing trees, playing hide-and-go-seek in the dark, and building everything under the sun in Dad?s shop were all great fun and excellent for body and soul. How few young people experience anything akin to this anymore.

The other downsides to all this excessive and unwise use of technology are very little real-world experience, a lack of exercise, isolation, much violence, adding to the stress and complexity of life, subtle programming of the mind, unhealthy electromagnetic waves, over stimulation, escapism, and information overload. And it takes a lot of earth?s fragile and unrenewable resources to produce all these electronics that are outdated the minute we buy them. And who can bear to think of all the desperate people around the globe who are dismantling them for their precious metals and all the while poisoning their bodies?

It?s not too late to question our culture in the light of our deepest religious values. And it?s not too late to return that video game and buy a basketball!
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NCR's Eco Catholic Blog

Eco Catholic is an exploration of the green Catholic imagination and ecological spirituality. Contributors include Rich Heffern, NCR staff writer, columnist and author, and Carol Meyer, executive director of the Sustainable Sanctuary Coalition.

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