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**Soul-Keeping in a Digital Age:  
The Role of Spiritual Practices and Traditions  
in a High-Tech World**

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## Soul-Keeping in a Digital Age: The Role of Spiritual Practices and Traditions in a High-Tech World

### Introduction

Like an unseen behavioral force-field, high-speed digital technology is changing our lives. Personal computers, the Internet, and cell phones are reshaping our personal, family, and communal lives in ways that we can see and ways we cannot. Consider the following three situations:

In Silicon Valley, California, the cultural anthropologist Jan English-Lueck is tracing the effects of digital culture on family life. She was sitting down at a dining room table one evening to interview a family. This was, by most contemporary standards, a well-functioning, healthy family with solid relationships. As they gathered, the mother realized this was the first time in weeks the family had been together face to face around the dinner table. Each family member had, in his or her bedroom or separate room in the house, a personal computer with high-speed Internet access, cable television, and a personal phone. They had fallen prey to what English-Lueck dubbed "the centripetal effect"—the tendency of technology to increasingly draw people away from time together in favor of digitally-dependent time alone.

In Bangalore, India, a human resource director at computer technology firm notes that becoming a software engineer in India not only offers an opportunity for rapid advancement in the globalized economy, but also enables him to expect a higher dowry from the family of a potential bride. Yet this comes at a price. A young engineer must work long hours and many weekends, a pace that is often only sustainable for a limited time before a younger replacement takes the job away. Also, one must be willing to relocate far away from one's extended family and age-old networks of support.

A teenage girl in Santa Barbara arrives home from school and enters her room. She has been deaf since birth. At school, she experiences a degree of isolation due to her disability, but in her room, life is different. She sits down at her computer and begins "Instant Messaging" with friends. A conversations using a screen instead of sound minimizes her disability. In her room she has a smoke alarm that will shake her bed at night if a fire is detected, an alarm clock that flashes her bedside light in the morning, closed captioning on her television, and a battery charger for a recently developed, surgically installed cochlear implant. Technology has radically decreased the isolation she would have known a decade ago.

High-speed digital technology is changing the world. Are the changes for the better or the worse, or a complex mix of blessing and curse? How can individuals, families, spiritual communities, and nations respond to these changes with integrity and wisdom?

In 2000, I received a grant to pursue these questions as part of a sabbatical leave. During this time, I was invited to serve as a Visiting Scholar in the Department of Religious Studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara. I conducted a "Delphi study," in which twenty-three diverse and well-informed individuals participated in a focused exploration of the topic. I made field visits to Silicon Valley and four cities in India, interviewing journalists, scholars, theologians, and people in the technology industry. Following my sabbatical, I received a second grant to study four focus groups for a year as they reflected on the evolving relationship between their spiritual lives and digital technology. This paper summarizes what I have learned.

### Part One: What are the Larger Trends and Questions?

The primary task of my first project was to identify major trends and viewpoints regarding the growing influence of technology. To do this, I chose to conduct a "Delphi study." Delphi studies, first developed by the Rand Corporation, have been used in many disciplines to predict future trends. In a Delphi study, a limited group of qualified informants is created through the recommendations of a panel of identified experts. In the first round, these nominees are invited to respond to a series of questions. The researcher summarizes the responses. In the second round, this summary is sent to the participants seeking concurrence or comment. With the resulting feedback, a summary of conclusions is created and distributed. While the participants are aware of each other's involvement, at no point during the process are they aware of who has made any particular comment.

In this project, the "Panel of Experts" was formed of twelve people who have a wide range of contacts in this particular area of inquiry (panelists listed in Appendix A). Each "Expert" nominated 3-5 people whose personal or professional experience qualifies them as persons knowledgeable about the interplay of globalization, technology, and spirituality. These fifty-eight nominees were invited to respond to eight open-ended questions. Twenty-three responses were returned (respondents listed in Appendix B). I summarized the responses for each question. In the second round, I sent participants these summaries and gave them the option of concurring with each summary or adding additional comments, including noting any disagreement or qualifications. Twenty-one participants returned the second round questionnaire. These comments were incorporated into revised statements, which became the findings of the study. The panelists and participants represent a variety of men and women in business, academia, and spiritually based organizations, many with international experience. (Below is a summary ; contact other for complete report.)

#### **1. As the forces of globalization, high-speed technology, and the Internet increasingly impact the human community, what changes do you see occurring in people's personal, family, and communal lives?**

*The changes occurring are many:*

- More isolation in personal life and more opportunities for relationships<sup>1</sup>
- The loss of genuinely private space
- More materialism, consumerism
- Accelerating expectations of productivity and use of time
- Traditional religions may be more able to sustain adherents regardless of physical distance, yet may lose authority due to the proliferation of spiritual options available and an increased sense of personal freedom
- There will be a blurring of personal and professional life
- There will be a greater chance of cross-cultural understanding
- There will be more sharing of information and a continued drive towards democratization
- There will be less time spent in face-to-face encounters
- There will be more collaborative decision-making
- There may be less patience with human and technological processes, at least in the short term
- There will be an increased sense of not being able to "keep up" due to the sheer amount of information and communication, at least in the short term

<sup>1</sup> One respondent noted that the potential for relationships will be stronger

