our wired life

Technology is on the rise. So is the intricate dilemma of balancing material prosperity with social and spiritual stability. A historian's perspective.

BY MORTON MARCUS

The nation divided. Terrorist threats from abroad. Moral values and economic security vanishing around us. Our children's behavior out of control. The very notion of what The United States stands for being questioned and changed before our eyes. An America once thought to be at least moderately liberal hardening into conservatism. And overall, these issues permeating every aspect of life, from politics, religion, and media to the very air we breathe.

Are these seemingly different issues connected? I think they are.

I've contemplated these topics for years, observing over the last four decades the seemingly inevitable approach to the current situation, and I've come up with a scenario which, if it might not make the reader feel more secure, may provide a fresh perspective from which to consider the situation and if not come to terms with it emotionally, possibly—just possibly—do something that might alleviate the confusion and self-destructive judgments we may be making as a nation because of it—judgments, strangely, against our self-interests as citizens and individuals.

Several factors form the basis of my scenario, and when they collide, as they have now, the current situation is the result. The most telling of these factors is the advancement of technology over the past three decades.

In 1970, Alvin Toffler published "Future Shock," a book that stated, among other things, that the advances in technology over the next 30 years would equal all the technological innovations in human history. I was less concerned with his economic theories than with his wondering how the human being would emotionally and psychologically cope with, let alone accept, the social and cultural changes this accelerated technology would bring with it. It seemed to me that he was picturing what can be likened to a stone-age man finding himself, without warning, in the middle of Times Square in the year 2000.

In subsequent books—"The Third Wave" (1980), "Powershift: Knowledge, Wealth and Violence at the Edge of the 21st Century" (1990), and "War and Anti-War" (1995)—Toffler further depicted the human psyche adrift in a dizzying flood of information brought about by this advancement in technology. This flood of information, he maintained, would enable us to solve problems with more individual creativity than before. But he also foresaw that the increased choices the new techno-logically-disseminated information brought with it would fragment society into small groups practicing a myriad of lifestyles which could well cause social disorientation and possibly rip the fabric of our culture apart.

Conflict, in fact, was inevitable, he said, but could be constructive. In an interview in 1998, he explained his theory of waves (his definition of what he saw as the three stages of major technological change in human history). Each wave brought with it "people in conflict. There are people who have their entire lives and fortunes invested in a particular way of life. Somebody comes along and says, 'Sorry now, we've got a different way of life,' they fight. Now again, that fight can be constructive, it can be creative, it can lead to new solutions to problems. But it often can be quite bitter."

It is those ideas, lifted from a wealth of others, that I see operative in all aspects of our lives today, both at home and abroad and I believe that if we understand them there is at least a possibility of integrating the conflicting sides and thereby avoiding a struggle that could shatter our way of life.

The New Technology & Tradition-bound Societies

Looking at Toffler's ideas from the viewpoint of tradition-bound societies—those societies whose social and religious ways make up the fabric of their citizens' lives, providing them with a strong sense of where they stand in the scheme of things—we can see the conflict clearly. The new technologies, with their wealth of gadgetry and ideas, steamroll over traditional ways, since they cause shifts in class structure and wealth distribution and eliminate notions of gender, status, moral presumptions and cosmic order, thereby calling into question various aspects of lifestyles which may have been practiced for untold centuries, not only in third world countries but in industrialized, consumer societies like our own.

Global examples of these shifts abound, but for the sake of our current concerns as a nation, let's concentrate on the socio-religious turmoil both in the Islamic world and here at home.

I first saw the connection of the advances in technology colliding with traditional socio-religious ways were seen in 1979 with the ouster of the pro-Western Shah of Iran and the immediate rise in his place of the Ayatollah Khomeni, the Islamic fundamentalist who, with overwhelming popular support, banned Western modes of dress, Western music, and the emancipated status of women in favor of what has been termed a return to a medieval Islamic state. If we substitute the word "technological" for "Western," the point of contention is clear. As far as the Ayatollah and a majority of Iranians
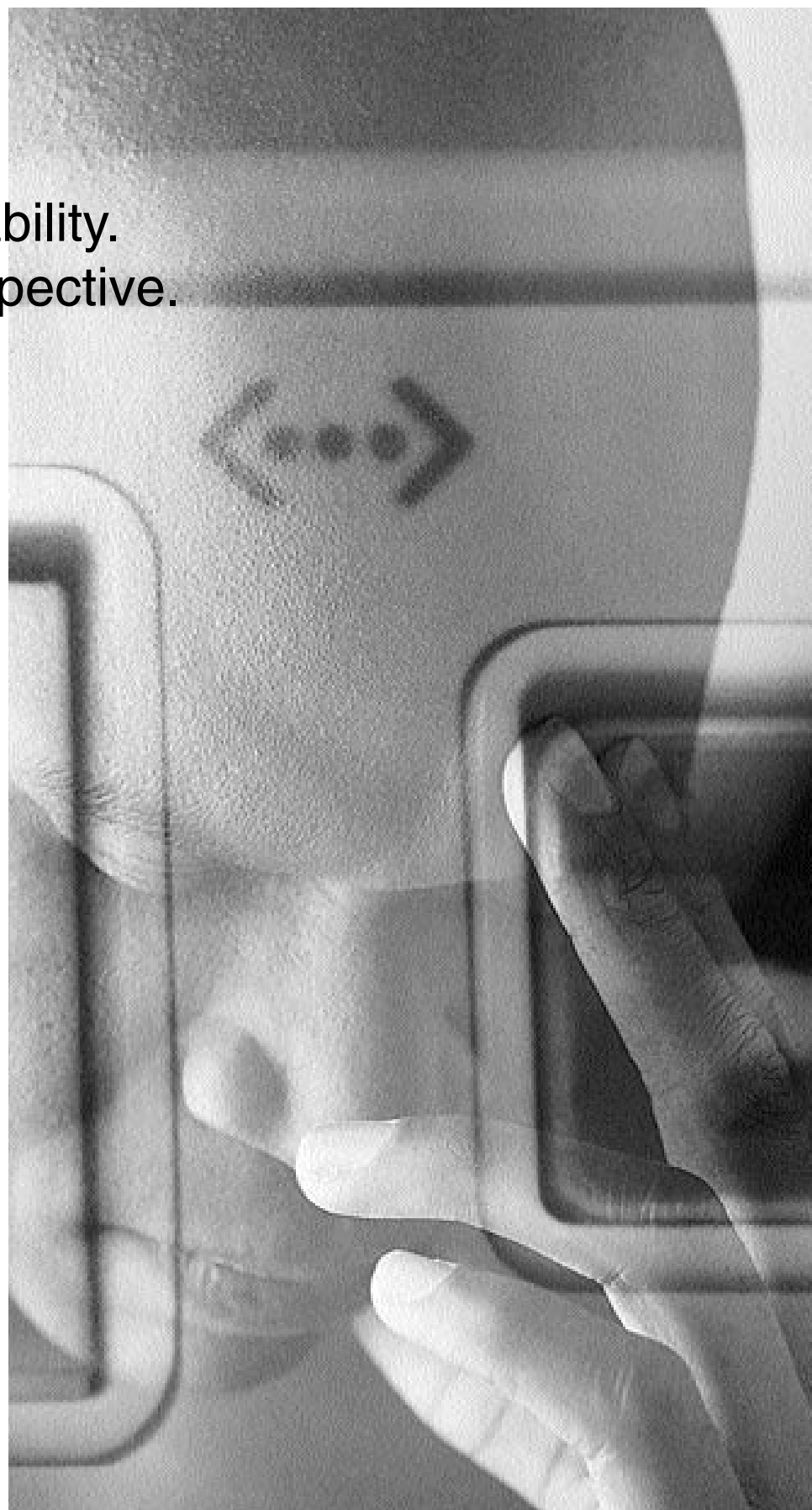
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were concerned, Western goods and ways were destroying the orthodox Islamic way of life. Too many ideas accompanied the influx of goods—too many ideas that were leading to changes in Islamic lifestyles and traditional ways.

The Ayatollah is no longer alive, but Osama bin Laden is continuing to wage war against the West for the same reasons, ironically—with his cell phones, walkie-talkies and assortment of weapons—using the new technology to fight against the intrusions that same technology has made upon the way of life he is defending.

It would be foolhardy, however, to point an accusing finger at bin Laden and the Islamic world and ignore similar, if not identical reactions to the freedom of choice technology has brought to the United States. The conflict that has

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polarized the population here is, although we never look at it this way, the same: not just fundamentalist evangelical Christians and Catholics, but, as the recent presidential election made clear, the majority of the American people are condemning the same technologically-inspired factors as are the fundamentalists in the Islamic world. As Toffler has pointed out, the resurgence of religion in the United States is a need for community in the face of the unsettling technological changes, which have made people feel "isolated, alone, anomic" and "willing to accept the particular theology that comes with [any seemingly secure] communal environment."

Simply, the situation is this: In a consumer cum information society riding the crest of the technological wave, we have more choices—more goods to buy, more information to contemplate, and more ways to choose to live (that is, more possible lifestyles are presented to us)—than in previous times. In fact, the possibilities of how we can conduct our lives have increased exponentially with the increased availability of information through the rapid acceleration of technology (television, computers, the Internet, cell phones, etc.). This plethora of choices, however, threatens a culture's established norms, and so conflict arises, whether in the Islamic world or in the United States, where the lifestyle changes first became apparent at the end of the 1960s as the baby boomers blossomed into the flower children. Certainly it doesn't take much imagination to see that from a strict Islamic point of view the multiple assaults of Western technology look like a crusade against the Moslem world, as bin Laden has repeatedly claimed.

The Masters Of The Machines

But the new technology didn't create this situation on its own. Machines do not function in a void: that the minds that invent them and the hands that aim, ignite, propel, and guide them are human; and the direction the new technology has taken and will continue to take reflect human goals. In other words, humans, specifically the powers-that-be in big business and politics, with all their human frailties and self-serving motivations, are steering this supposedly unsinkable Titanic into the mist-shrouded seas of the future.

At the same time, it is also true that technology takes on a life of its own once humans set it in motion. Witness the advances in global communications in the last 160 years. The telegraph, invented in 1844, soon gave way to the telephone, which in turn gave way to radio, television, and, most recently, satellite broadcasting. And the latter has made news as well as other forms of information almost instantly available anywhere on the planet. This means that we are deluged with news of natural and human-made disasters almost hourly, from the hurricanes in Florida and the tsunami in Southeast Asia to the genocides in Rwanda and the southern Sudan—to the terrorist bombings in the Middle East.

With so much information assaulting our senses, a feeling of being overwhelmed and helpless has pervaded our psyches, almost stunning the planet's populace to numbed inaction, thus producing a passive acceptance that threatens to stifle thinking about possible solutions to whatever future problems may arise in one area or another. That's bad enough. But at the same time we must guard against the insidious human manipulations of technology I referred to before, always keeping in mind that how we are affected by what we see on television and what new gadget we are coaxed into purchasing in the market is part of a capitalist system that wants to both keep products moving and us happy with our lot as we buy them.

However, this is not to say that all aspects of technological advancement are being guided by a conspiracy of rapacious businessmen or power-hungry politicians, although in large part that may be so. Whether different aspects of the new technology are set in motion for benevolent reasons or reasons of economic or political gain,
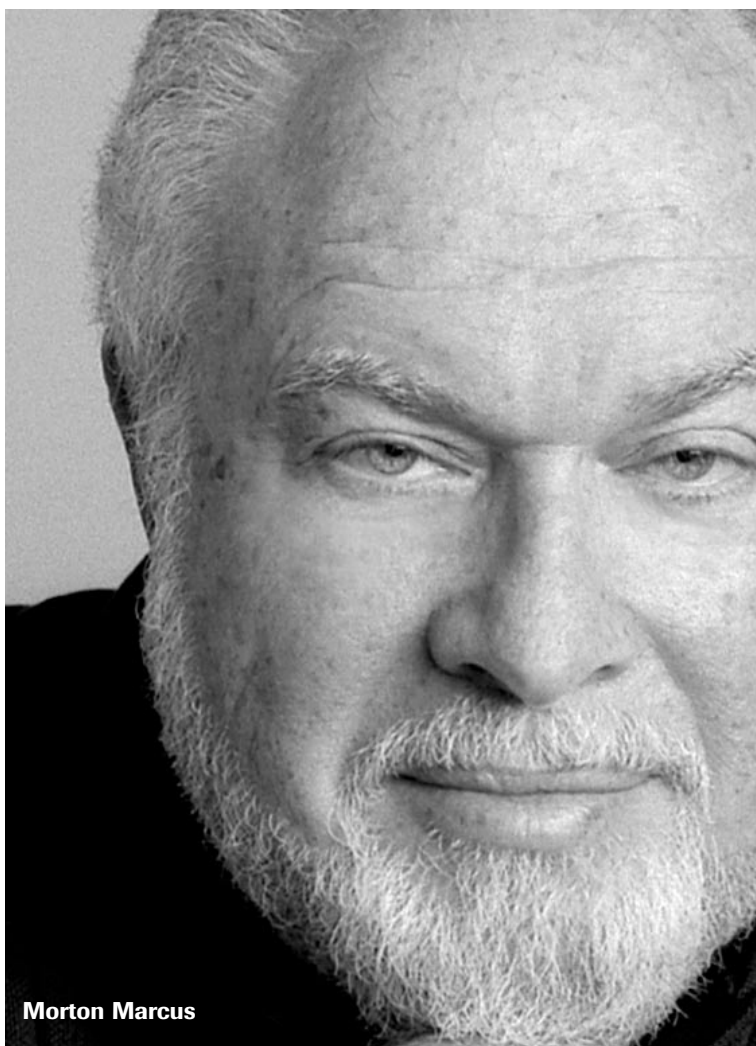
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those who set them in motion seem to do so without regard to the consequences. And it is the nature of those consequences that need to be addressed. The new technology is like an explosion releasing a chain reaction of unforeseen events in terms of the social and psychological repercussions it is having on people around the world.

Hypocrisy & Materialism in Techno-America

An interesting point in all this turmoil is that in the United States we joyously accept the technological juggernaut as far as its production of material goods, advances in medicine and comfort products in general are concerned. But we refuse to recognize, let alone accept, the choices and availability of multiple lifestyles and ways of thought that come with it. To put it another way, in addition to the many things we gain through this accelerated technology (longer life, better quality of living and material prosperity) we also increase our knowledge of the possibilities in ways of living (or many different lifestyles) which, as the last election showed, the majority of the American populace see as a threat to the moral infrastructure that governs our society.

But is this new information really a threat to the nation's morality? First of all, whose morality is this new, supposed morally-motivated majority talking about? I won't attempt to answer that question here, recognizing that there are many moral systems at work in this country, a number of them rationalizations for one group or another's behavior. The question gets even more difficult to answer when you realize that many of these moral stances are based on individual interpretations of a book (the Bible) or set of unanswerable religious and philosophical conundrums.

I will, however, point out the hypocrisy in a population that says it is guided by moral values when it attempts to suppress parts of what the new technology has brought with it but embraces those parts which it finds acceptable to its wants. I'm talking about our acceptance of those aspects of the new technology that deal with the production, sales and thereby accumulation of goods which seems to have fostered a rampant materialism, an almost epidemic acquisitiveness and a new level of conspicuous consumption in American society. We rush about madly, buying and spending. In fact, it seems that we must buy, buy, buy and own, own, own every product that comes on the market, from computer toys and vanity-motivated plastic surgery to gas-guzzling, behemoth SUVs whose four-wheel drives few consumers need or even use.

Nowhere is this materialistic take-over by the new technology more visible than in the use of iPod and cell phones. Daily we see herds of people, in cars or strolling and jogging on the street, with earphones clamped to their heads or phones pressed to their ears, as they exercise or make their way from one appointment to

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another. All the while—as their eardrums are bombarded with punk rock or hip-hop, or as they chat about the most trivial matters with friends and lovers—they ignore the life around them, becoming more alienated from it and from their fellow humans.

This rampant, ever-conspicuous materialism has given rise to a soul-corrupting sense of entitlement and hedonistic self-involvement to which the supposed morally-motivated majority has conveniently turned a blind eye. Here we can also hold the powers-that-be in big business accountable, since they have relentlessly promoted the buying craze with their endless advertising campaigns. The result of this materialism is that immediate gratification and greed have become the norm, and we witness the consequences of our embracing them daily in the arrogance, self-centeredness, and rude, crude behavior around us. Such conduct has been adopted most noticeably by sports figures and other celebrities, has become a staple element of TV sitcoms and mainstream films, and through those examples has affected the attitudes and behavior of the young—which seems to me a much more worrisome problem than the supposedly "immoral" ideas the new technology has made available.

What We Lose

The new technology has caused us to lose almost as much in terms of social and spiritual stability as we have gained in material prosperity, for it has undermined those moral and social structures which make up the landscape of traditional ways. Technological change has also altered the physical landscape by destroying the environment as we develop new methods of production, search for more fuel to run the machines that the new technology develops, and provide more housing for the increased population who live longer and healthier because of medical technological advances. It is not surprising, therefore, to learn that Toffler has pointed out the irony of our accepting so much of what the technological advances have brought while at the same time refusing to acknowledge the loss, choices, multiple ways of thought and changed lifestyles that come with them, as if the general populace wanted their cake and still be able to eat it.

To me, our lack of understanding the overall picture of what the accelerated technology has brought with it has created a schizophrenic society in which we are torn in several directions at once, since we are in a state of constant emotional, intellectual—not to mention social—upheaval.

Security, "safety," in such a situation, is impossible. But then, there never has been safety in the world. The world, both human and natural, is and always has been in a constant state of change. And that is the primary truth we have to accept. Things don't last forever, whether we're talking about love or governments, traditional ways or revolutionary thinking. Threat and catastrophe follow blissful moments, as history has shown us again and again. And only a nation such as our own, which has been spared many of the political and religiously-inspired catastrophes endured by other countries, can delude itself into thinking that the things of this world are permanent.

And so it is that technology has wrought changes in our lives that we might not want to accept. Family structure has collapsed because of it, and the behavior of our children—and with the global spread of technology, the behavior of children around the world—is one of the most disturbing manifestations of it. The rootlessness of the young has been most
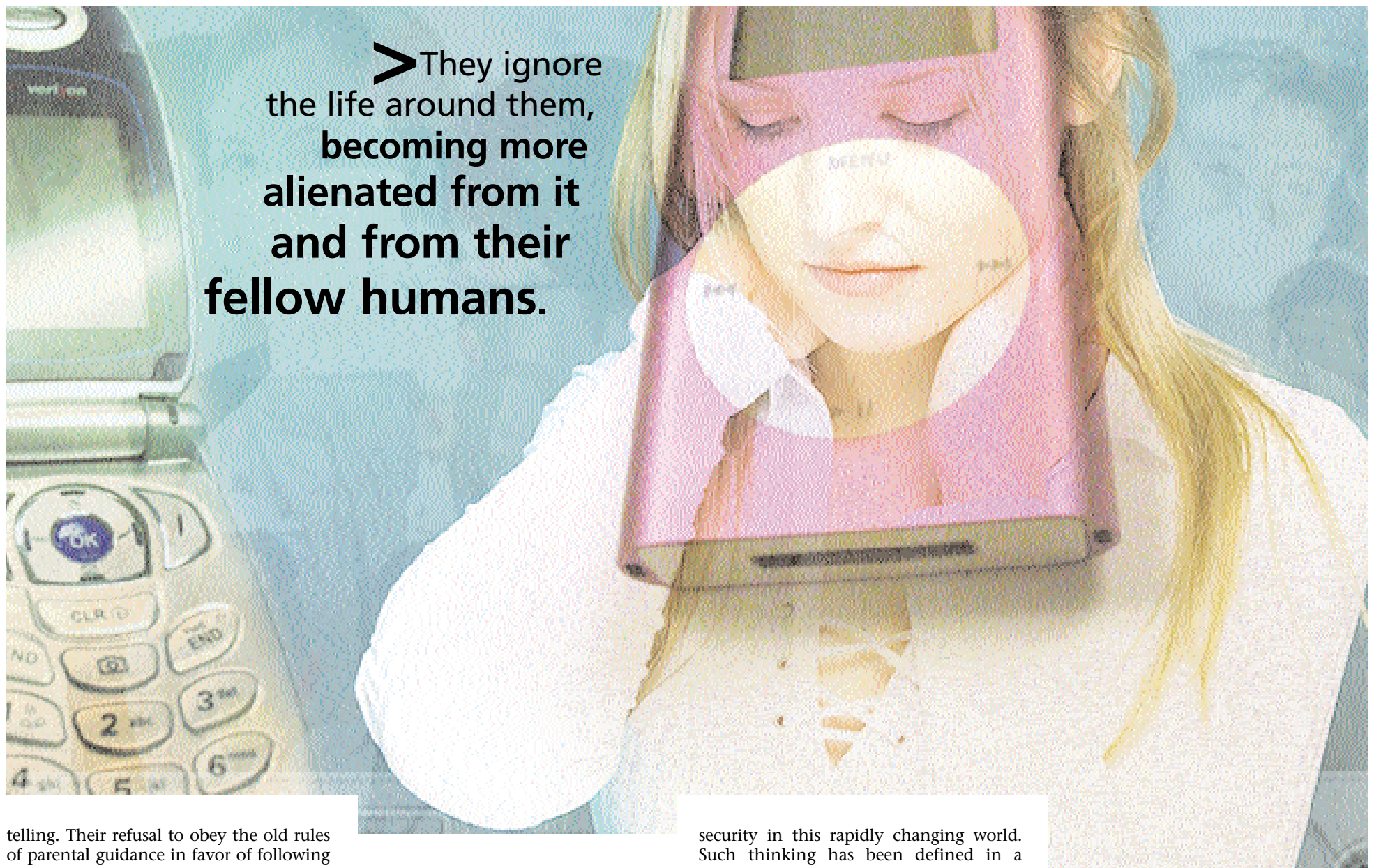
telling. Their refusal to obey the old rules of parental guidance in favor of following the anarchic ways of their peers, as well as following the examples of behavior provided by the technologically developed media, are undeniable, even though in the United States traditional ways of nurturing and rules of upbringing in many cases were brought to this country by immigrant groups only a generation ago.

However, our children's behavioral problems may well stem from technologically induced physical and mental disabilities. Television, cell phones, iPods and other sound systems with high-decibel levels, contribute to sensory overload, which must in some way affect not only a young person's hearing but his nervous system as well. The sugar, fat, salt, and chemical content of fast foods create hypertension, hyperactivity and, of course, obesity. In this connection, it is interesting to note that doctors and primary school teachers are voicing concern over the increasing number of cases of ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder), autism, and psychological problems in general in their young patients and students. All of these physical and mental impairments can cause discipline problems, and their treatments with miracle meds, such as Paxil, Prozac, prednisone, and even Valium—every one of them a product of the new technology—have been blamed for such behavioral problems as depression and uncontrollable mood swings to acts of violence and suicide.

What we see around us is the physical effect the new technology has had on young and old alike, and up to now we have sought easy explanations for the causes of these problems, one segment of the population superficially blaming the widespread uncontrolled behavior and family turmoil on the loss of "family values"—whatever that vague, undefined term means—and the other segments, armed with the information disseminated by the new technology, not only rejecting the values of the status quo but the values of all groups except their own.

It is not surprising, therefore, that our population has not only polarized but fragmented into a number of sub-groups embracing on one hand, and refusing to accept on the other, different moral and ethical values and a myriad of lifestyles. Looked at from the outside by tradition-bound societies, the familial and social upheaval in this country is threatening if not frightening. Certainly the rise and aims of fundamentalist religious groups in the United States wanting to stem the proliferation of different lifestyles and values is uncannily similar to the rise and concerns of fundamentalist Moslem groups abroad.

And the Solution?

Toffler says the solution is an individual one. He points out that an individual must be able to adapt to the changes brought about by the new technology. "But," he adds, "in order to make decisions at a high speed and in great complexity … you need to know who you are and what your criteria are. You need to know what you value more than anything else." Such values are not achieved by instinct or faith, however, but rather by "obviously getting an education, getting appropriate skills …"

Living with change, acknowledging it and using it, are Toffler's definitions of acquiring at least mental and economic security in this rapidly changing world. Such thinking has been defined in a number of ways by media pundits, each definition pitting those who resist change against those who embrace it, such as "the pragmatic versus the religious," "science versus faith," "reason versus instinct." Looked at from the viewpoint of this article, the problem achieves the different perspective of "technology versus traditional ways."

The purpose of this article is not to provide or promulgate solutions. It is to picture the problem in a different manner. That said, I think there are some steps that can be taken that in their very simplicity can go a long way to alleviate the polarization that is taking place here and abroad.

First, it seems clear to me that neither technology nor tradition can be abandoned. They must be integrated in some way. I realize that such a statement is anthropologically unsound, since removing a single brick from a traditional sociological structure almost always results in the collapse of the entire edifice. But some amalgamation of the old and the new in the situation in which we find ourselves needs to be achieved. Certainly the technological locomotive (and those who are driving it) must not be allowed to run away with us, for it is clear that our minds cannot adapt to the rapidly changing landscape we behold through the rushing train windows. The memories of where we've been, those train stations whose names fade into the past, refuse to be erased, and what we have cherished as a species since the dawn of time, those values which seem to be imprinted on our chromosomes, will not be expunged. Toffler recognizes this when he talks about the moral dilemmas that will confront us over the replication of DNA, a subject that in terms of morality can be expanded to include the current debates over stem cell research, abortion rights, and even same sex marriage.

At the same time, we cannot turn away from the new technological world. Change will occur no matter what. But, that change can be sidetracked, and we can swarm from the train and destroy every part of the landscape and the houses and people in it that we don't understand but "feel" threaten our traditional ways. Heaven knows, it has happened before. The only answers, perhaps, are an old and simple ones: "tolerance" and "education."

Tolerance & Education

By tolerance I mean allowing people to live their lives in the way they want as long as their choices do not interfere with other people's ways. Or, simply, to live and let live. That is, really, the underlying ethos of the United States, a nation of immigrants who brought from the persecution of other "closed" societies their different religions and lifestyles in order to freely practice their beliefs. Once settled here, those groups saw the danger of imposing their ways on one another, and that apprehension inspired our forefathers to separate church and state once the nation was founded.

As for education, I follow both the precepts of my strictly religious peasant immigrant family, whose motto is "you must know everything," and the dictates of the Scottish Evangelical preacher John Wilkerson, the sixth president of Princeton

University and a New Jersey delegate to the Continental Congress during the American Revolution. Wilkerson, who moved to the Colonies in 1768, was a vigorous backer of the Revolution, and as president of Princeton believed that the spirit of liberty resided in free enquiry. He therefore instituted a curriculum at Princeton comprised of all areas of knowledge, and included the works of those thinkers whose ideas he disapproved of personally and religiously, so his students could know all sides of all subjects. This inclusive practice became the foundation of American education, and Reverend Wilkerson one of our most important educators.

Wilkerson was inclusive in other ways. Not only did he encourage students of all denominations to attend Princeton, he recruited both Native Americans and African Americans to attend the university as well. He also believed that science was not an opponent but an ally of religion and stressed its teaching along with theology and the other humanities. Wilkerson's vision of an America where all ideas and ways of life could co-exist was the dream of our forefathers.

I have been thinking of the good reverend as I hear on the news that the new moral majority, composed in large part, in this case, by the new Evangelicals, is pressing the President to institute social and constitutional reforms, which are not inclusive but exclusive. They want what I term a narrowing of choices, a promulgation of their ways and beliefs to the exclusion of others. Already the Texas board of education has forced several major textbook companies to alter their definition of marriage to support Evangelical views. If this becomes a trend in post-election America, it might not be long before the teaching of evolution—and other subjects abhorrent to fundamentalist Christian thought—could be questioned as well, and the gap between church and state, a gap so vigorously fostered by our forefathers—including such a fiery Evangelical as Wilkerson—could disappear.

Especially alarming was the majority's action against its own self-interest in the last election, which was, in actuality, to vote against those aspects of the new technology it found repugnant. Faced with an increased loss of jobs through outsourcing; a mishandled, unnecessary war that continues to maim and kill its children; soaring healthcare costs; a threat to social security; and the most gigantic federal debt and international trade deficit in our history, the majority, blind to all but its will-o'-the-wisp moral concerns, voted to retain the administration that caused all the problems and will continue to do so, since it considers the election results a mandate for pursuing its policies.

Such a narrowing of possibilities implies a giant step backwards for the original promises of America, and whereas I respect and encourage the Evangelicals and other members of the new moral majority in pursuing their beliefs, I am completely against their imposing their beliefs on the rest of the country, especially in the political arena.

I cannot speak for Moslem fundamentalists. I can only hope that they will become more tolerant in their views and more aware of the consequences of their actions. Certainly an open America, more tolerant in *its* views and more aware of the consequences of *its* actions, can provide an example for them and other groups like them.

But, of course, American and Moslem fundamentalists are only part of the problem. Corporate bosses and heads of state use the new technology for their own ends. This means that now more than ever it is important to be an educated, vigilant populace actively aware of our own prejudices and our leaders' often devious and covert manipulations if we hope to rectify what problems arise. And we must put continuous pressure on our representatives in local, federal and state government to act on our behalf, rather than conduct business along party lines.

In the end, however, the point is not whether the situation now confronting us was set in motion and is kept running by insidious manipulators, or if it is a runaway train beyond our control. It is best to think in terms of what the world of accelerated technology is doing to us—or more precisely: we must think of how the new technology is affecting the planet on which we live, as well as our moral, ethical and spiritual values, so we can think clearly about its intrusions in our lives, and thereby, hopefully, not only maintain our mental balance in the face of it, but hopefully rectify the problems that have arisen because of it.

The world has seen rabid, intolerant movements—religious, national, political, and economic—many times before, and the result has been not only giant steps backward for humankind but periods of brutal repression and devastating wars in which entire populations were decimated.

We stand on the brink of unnecessarily dreadful events, which can result in a catastrophe that may annihilate us all, or we can usher in a period of tolerance and brotherhood where we can turn our attention to solving some of the real dilemmas that face the entire species and the planet on which we live.

Tolerance and education, the free exchange of ideas and respect for others' beliefs, and vigilantly guarding against the misuse of the new technology by the powers-that-be, can bring the world to a never-before realized homogeneity where technology will go a long way in aiding us to solve our problems, or we can sink into the age-old barbarity of tribalism where, as the poet Mathew Arnold envisioned, we will stand

... on a darkling plain
Swept with confused alarms of
struggle and flight,
Where ignorant armies clash by night.

Morton Marcus was the 1999 Santa Cruz County Artist of the Year. He is the author of 10 books and taught film and literature at Cabrillo College for 30 years. A historian as well as a poet and film critic, he has been on various panels concerning the Balkans and The Middle East. His Web site is <morton marcus.jlmphotography.com>.