

## Man's suicide, issues of communication

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Among the most unusual and upsetting news stories I've recently seen is the one that appeared in The China Post via The Apple Daily in late July about a 57-year-old vegetable vendor who committed suicide (CP 7-13-13 p. 16).

The headline of the report was as simplistic as it was ambiguous: "Smartphone confusion leads to man's suicide." The opening words of the piece spoke of a note the gentleman left behind.

"I suddenly understand that I should go now," he wrote. "I have been unable to keep up with the times. Those computers, mobile phones, I know nothing about. What's the meaning of living on?"

After an initial sense of shock, I suppose any normal person reading those words would question their authenticity. What is this, a prank? Some guy gives up on life because he can't deal with high technology? You mean to say it was that simple?

If you'll pardon the cliché, the rest of the news article showed that the story had more to it than what met the eye.

The man had been married twice, and had recently been divorced. He was living alone in Changhua. He was said to have been a frequent visitor at the home of his son in Taichung, where he found his three grandsons apparently more interested in their smartphones and Internet activities than in talking with him. His son said his father "hardly had any interactions with the grandsons because of the technological gap."

Things might have been a lot more complicated than this, but the basic truths seem clear. Loneliness is something with which we all must learn to live, reaching out to our loved ones for the pleasures of social contact is only normal and wise and, when relationships crash, the pain that results can be devastating.

One of the defining qualities of a damaging involvement in life is that it interferes with relationships that usually mean very much to us. A guy gets too much into alcohol or too much into sports or too much into work, and suddenly the people around him feel cut off, neglected, perhaps even abandoned. There are of course degrees of attraction to objects or activities that bring us pleasure. No one wants to abuse the word

"addiction." We frequently see small signs of over-attachment to the conveniences of modern technology all around us. Do we pay them any mind? Should we?

You sit in an expensive restaurant and observe a well-dressed couple at a nearby table. One of them has put the chopsticks down and stopped eating, the better to handle a telephone call. The call goes on and on, and suddenly the partner across the table whips out an iPad or genius phone, and begins to play with it. The food sits there, unattended and unappreciated. It's a good thing food doesn't have emotions.

But people do.

I've commented in the past about ruffled feelings that may arise at meetings when colleagues toy with Google or Facebook, or respond to emails as chairs or other administrators sweat themselves silly at offering reports or begging for discussion on important matters. The unnecessary and blanket use of high-tech gizmos during meetings while others are investing time and effort to communicate is, for me, more than only disrespectful. Behavior like that is rude and offensive.

The suicide victim I mentioned above may have had problems far beyond a generation gap with his grandsons. There had to have been more happening here than what we see on the surface.

We hear a lot of talk these days about the necessity of parents sharing more time with their children. After all, if they are to be happy, our young friends do need to feel cared about. At the same time, children and teens may also need a gentle push to become more aware of the feelings of people around them. I just have to wonder if in some ways our high-tech conveniences block the growth of human sensitivity for our youth.

To be fair, maybe those of us who are older should be more humble (and brave) about our ignorance of the vagaries of high technology. Enthusiasm for genius phones (ha, ha) and the like need not be a scary monster or a spiritual evil. We could benefit here with a bit more middle ground where people of all ages could meet, spend time together, and show a little tenderness for one another.

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