Romantic dinners interrupted by cell phones; kids playing with electronic devices; groups of friends typing silently, ignoring each others’ presence—these ordinary scenes, which make up our routine lives, are instances that the psychologist and MIT professor Sherry Turkle points out to her interviewer, writer Megan Garber. By observing the “sea of humans who . . . seem to be, indeed, alone together,” due to their lack of attention towards one another, Turkle claims that “our reliance on devices . . . isolate[s] us under the auspices of connection,” a claim that Garber explores in her write-up of their meeting, “Saving the Lost Art of Conversation.” According to Garber, “[c]onversations, as they tend to play out in person, are messy—full of pauses and interruptions and topic changes and assorted awkwardness.” This “messiness,” which “gives participants the time—and, just as important, the permission—to think and react and glean insights,” plays the primary role in personal interaction; it is an essential tool for a “true exchange” (Garber). Unfortunately, our constant use of electronic devices “in ‘sacred spaces’ like the dinner table, the places where phones and their enticements may impede intimacy and interaction,” decreases the amount of attention that we pay to the most direct, immediate and pure form of expression: in-person conversation (Garber). Because of our inattention to our physical presence, we often miss the surprise appearance of some “interesting bit” that comes up, as if by magic, out of our interpersonal conversational “messiness” (Turkle, qtd. in Garber). Technology prevents surprise and genuine engagement with the reality that surrounds us; it provides us with a controlled form of entertainment and communication. Its restrictive boundaries guard against the unforeseen, unless we let “messiness” invade our lives.

Fearing this “messiness,” we tend to value order over chaos, maybe because we know that disorder spurs the uncertainty and insecurity that torments us and threatens our ability to control every aspect of our lives. We fear unheralded disruptions that hinder our perfectly planned responses to
life. In search of safety, we end up simplifying our lives and turning ourselves into “living machine[s]”—crickets—the simple and predictable organisms that Lewis Thomas describes in his essay “Crickets, Bats, Cats, & Chaos” (491). Thomas explains that for a “cricket,” “moth,” or “lacewing,” chaos is the last-chance response to the threat of the unpredicted appearance of a predator (491). Being in immediate and mortal danger, the insect launches into wild, chaotic flight patterns as “unpredictable [and] random” as possible, in an attempt to save its own life (492). The chaotic solutions are, for insects, responses to threat.

Humans, however, respond to threat in an opposite manner, creating regulatory systems in order to avoid chaos. Manuals, maps, schedules, signs, technology, and clocks all work to erase that uncomfortable sensation of not knowing what is about to occur. Each and every one of these systems is a human creation that leaves no room for the “messiness” of Turkle’s ideal conversations. These inventions organize life like an encyclopedia, in which everything that we need to know is perfectly described and neatly packaged for our convenience. As Tim Wu writes in his article, “As Technology Gets Better, Will Society Get Worse?” technology is one of the several “mechanisms” that we use “to keep humanity on track”—“to make things easy.” Every day we check our phones for weather forecasts, get in touch with our friends through social media, and find our favorite restaurants through a convenient mobile app. Yet, as Wu affirms, even though “technological evolution” does make our daily lives easier, we are often unable to see that our search for comfort has its cost: the price of convenience is our disregard for the magic of the uncontrolled. We never know if, by missing the weather forecast on a rainy day, we may get the chance to share someone’s umbrella. How much more of a difference we could make to a friend in need by replacing a distant message of comfort with an actual hug. In getting lost, we might find someone special when asking for directions. The problem is that we do not even give these unexpected situations a chance to happen; we decide that it is better to eliminate doubt than to see what may occur. This self-induced blindness makes us mechanized human beings—the high price we pay for control.

Yet, there is still hope for us. Even the cricket—“a creature in nature meriting the dismissive description of a living machine”—whose chaotic
behavior seems to be only a response to the threat, is not as mechanical as we may imagine (Thomas 491, 492). “In order to achieve that feat of wild chaotic flight, and thus escape,” Thomas claims that the insect “has to make use, literally, of his brain” (492). To consider the chaotic response of Thomas’s cricket not just as random and unpredictable, but also as a creative response essential for its survival, may help us to overcome our attachment to control. Our constant rejection of chaos might, then, be a continuous denial of our own creative nature. As Thomas claims, our chaos is not induced by a bat; it is not suddenly switched on in order to facilitate escape; it is not an evasive tactic set off by any new danger, but “chaos is the norm [for] our minds” (492). Unlike crickets, we are bound to face unexpected situations every day no matter how hard we try to avoid them.

Paradoxically, our tendency to ignore our natural state of “messiness” generates much more “chaos” than embracing it. The problem with “technological evolution,” as Wu claims, is that “unfortunately, we don’t always make the best decisions,” because technological evolution is “driven by what we want as opposed to what is adaptive.” We continually use our knowledge and energies to create devices that we think are fundamental for convenience and control. Wu defines “technological evolution” as “self-evolution”—a force that goes against “biological evolution” and over which we have no control. This “biological evolution” indeed “favors organisms who are adapted to their environments” and does not favor environments that are adapted to their organisms (Wu). Our search for safety and comfort has caused us to rely on our inventions and, eventually, will disconnect us from the complex world that surrounds us. In fact, Lewis believes that we lack “awareness [of] nature itself” (493). With the emergence of technologies that offer convenience and predictability, we misguidedy think that this predictability brings awareness. Or, we may purposely avoid being aware of our surroundings because deep down we know that nature’s unpredictable evolution makes it impossible for us to shape and force order upon the natural world. For these reasons, we may fail to notice that we now rely on non-adaptive choices in order to function, which will have serious consequences if our techno-genic civilization cannot be sustained.

This “self-evolution” undermines our natural evolution, perhaps even jeopardizing our survival. The face of human communication is changing,
many say for the worse. Turkle observes that text messages have become preferable to personal conversations, creating relationships based on premeditated and controlled communication instead of on the intrinsic unpredictability and intimacy of a face-to-face conversation. But such control, even in our most trivial daily interactions, blinds us to our physical and emotional states. The irony is that we do not even notice the damage we do to ourselves. Caught in a vicious cycle, we attempt to control the world, but, in turn, impoverish our inner selves. Trying to control chaos—our natural state—comes at this high price.

Is there a way to expand our tolerance for the chaotic? Or will we always be trapped by our need to be in control? In his essay, “Opening the Gate,” John Berger imagines that experiencing the aberrant might offer us a possibility to step outside the controlled world we create around us. He observes how his house guests, leafing through Pentti Sammallahti’s photographs, would “gasp at first, and then peer closer, smiling” (3). According to Berger, Sammallahti’s photographs challenge “the set of daily appearances surrounding us” by depicting dogs in such a way that “the human order” of the observers, while “still in sight, is nevertheless no longer central and is slipping away” (4, 5). Berger imagines these canines, whose keen sense of smell and sound enables them to live at “the natural frontier,” are, like nomads and children, “attuned both to the human order and to other visible orders” (5). Berger wonders if, while observing these dogs, the adult observers may tap into memories of childhood, of an imagination free of preconceived forms of experience. Berger believes that, as children, we are not caught up in our controlled, ordered lives and are surprised and delighted by everything we see. Unfortunately, that delight starts to fade, eventually disappearing completely. Perhaps it is in getting back in touch with our curiosity and wonder that we can open the gate and step back into the unknown.

In his essay “Burl’s,” Bernard Cooper remembers the moment when he lost the innocence of childhood and realized that his parents had built a strong sheltering structure around him. He narrates a memory of a family dinner at a restaurant that was interrupted when his father sent him to buy a newspaper across the street. He recalls how, once outside the diner, an unexpected encounter with two transvestites made him, an eight-year-old boy, realize that “everything [he] had taken for granted up to that moment—the
curve of the earth, the heat of the sun, the reliability of [his] own eyes—[had] been squeezed out of [him]” (693). The exit from the restaurant, a place that offered him a “refuge from the street,” meant the discovery of new deep sensations, which filled him not only with uncertainty, but also with exhilaration (692). Cooper understood much more about himself and the world that surrounded him through his encounter with these figures, who were incongruent with his previous perceptions and defiant of conventional gender definitions. The realization that gender lines can blur inspired Cooper to keep wondering, to keep exploring what else lay there beyond his known world—beyond the safety of the restaurant’s “sleek architecture, chrome appliances, and arctic temperature,” where Cooper and his parents used to “s[it] at one of the booths in front of the plate-glass windows,” frozen in their certainty about how they should act (692). But after his encounter, nothing was certain anymore. The exit from his protective bubble helped Cooper step outside preconceived boundaries and open his mind.

However, Cooper’s exhilarations came at a price. Once outside the refuge of childhood, without the shelter of his known experiences, he discovered the anxiety of not being able to assign things a definite order. All the comfort he used to have when he was able to “divide the world into male and female columns” and “simplify matter into compatible pairs” vanished as soon as he realized that “there also existed a vast range of things that didn’t fit neatly in either camp” (694). This anxiety is the very thing that we try to avoid by clinging to our safe havens of certainty. Yet sometimes, what seems to be our most trustworthy ally—our protective shelter—turns into our most deceitful enemy. In her essay, “Refugium,” Barbara Hurd observes the “pitcher plant,” which “is designed to look like safe harbor to fleeing insects” seeking refuge from predators, but actually reveals itself to be “a carefully engineered lure and deathtrap” (712). When applied to our own lives, perhaps we should consider a strong truth: when we seek protection and certainty, we risk falling into a terrible trap. Even though our lack of full awareness of our surroundings may not result in a literal death, we may fail to notice that while living comfortably in our controlled environments, we sacrifice something of ourselves.

Does respect for the uncertain allow us to avoid the death of imagination? Should we always seek excitement? It seems unlikely that we could bear
having every single moment of our lives be a pursuit of stimulation. This, in fact, may be a trap of its own, blinding us to the “boring bits” of life that Turkle wants us to value. We might seek to fend off boredom by seeking exhilaration and entertainment, but in doing so, we may end up trivializing the value of the “interesting bit.” In his speech, “In Praise of Boredom,” Joseph Brodsky claims that moments of dullness are necessary for the development and appearance of great new ideas and inventions. “[I]t would seem,” says Brodsky, that whenever we feel bored, we look for “constant inventiveness and originality” because we believe that it is “the best remedy against” the boredom that naturally fills our lives (104). Instead of always trying to find new ways to fight the banal, Brodsky believes that we should just “let [ourselves] be crushed” in boredom’s “awful bear hug,” because “there is no embrace in this world that won’t finally unclasp” (108, 111). Boredom, according to Brodsky, allows for sparks of creative magic to surface.

What we really need to survive and feel alive is to let go of order: not to fear the absence of control and the impossibility of giving life a precise meaning and shape. We should make use of technology in a way that benefits our personal development. As Wu claims, “[t]he technology industry, which does so much to define us, has a duty to cater to our more complete selves rather than just our narrow interests,” so the responsibility to make use of the opportunities offered by technology falls directly to us. Even though there are times in life when we need refuge, there may also be times when we need to venture out in order to survive and feel complete as individuals. A little bit of uncertainty, even boredom, could enrich our lives and allow us to see possibilities beyond our natural instinct to control. By letting go, the magic of the uncontrollable has the opportunity to surprise us with the unforeseen, pulling us away from our computers and our phones to make us feel truly alive.

WORKS CITED


