



Together, yet miles apart by Ann Kelley, Director of Communications/Website

I arrived ten minutes early—an accident of timing more than intention—and was led to a small table near the window. The host handed me a menu with a smile that barely reached his eyes. I thanked him, slid into the seat, and laid my phone face-down on the table, as if I were proving something to myself.

The restaurant hummed with soft music and clinking silverware, but there was an odd stillness beneath it all, like a low hush in a crowded waiting room. I glanced around. There were people here, but most weren't really *present*.

At a table diagonally across from mine, a couple sat across from each other, each hunched slightly over glowing screens, thumbs tapping. Their plates were already half-eaten, their mouths busy with bites and swipes, but not words. I wondered if they were texting each other—or maybe just scrolling through different versions of distraction.

To my left, a group of three friends—college-age, maybe—sat in a semicircle around their table. Every one of them had a phone in hand. They weren't talking, just reacting with little murmurs, sharing a screen now and then, but mostly retreating into their own worlds.

There were exceptions. In the corner, a pair of older women were deep in conversation, leaning in slightly, hands animated, eyes alive. Their laughter rose above the low din for a moment, warm and real. It made me smile.

I shifted in my seat, glanced at the entrance, then checked my watch—not my phone. Five minutes late. Not unusual for my friend. I took a sip of water and let my eyes wander again.

A man sat two tables away, alone like me. But unlike me, he was entirely immersed in his phone. He hadn't looked up once. His meal arrived and he nodded to the server without looking up, barely pausing the motion of his thumb.

It struck me how strange it was—so many people gathered in one place, yet so many miles apart.

I looked toward the door again just as my friend walked in, eyes searching the room. I raised my hand, and as she spotted me, a smile crossed her face. Real. Unfiltered. In that moment, I was glad I was looking up and didn't have my head in my phone.

The Decline of Communication Skills in the Age of Smartphones

With eyes glued to screens and fingers scrolling endlessly, smartphones are gradually eroding the core of human interaction. What was once face-to-face conversations are now a series of texts, emojis, and voice notes. Many young people feel more comfortable sending a message than making a phone call, let alone having a real-life conversation.

Researchers are alarmed by the decline in communication skills. Eye contact, body language, tone of voice — all vital elements of meaningful interaction — are being neglected. Constant phone use creates distractions that prevent people from being present in the moment.

The solution isn't to abandon technology, but to use it more mindfully. Setting boundaries, being intentional with in-person interactions, and practicing active listening can go a long way in preserving the communication skills that make us human.

In the last issue of *Bloom* we looked at the importance of practicing *active listening*. In this issue we continue the topic of communication by addressing the importance of presence and face-to-face connection. Past issues at www.justmoved.org/encouragement-for-uprooted/bloom

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Ann Kelley, editor



Why Face-to-Face Conversation Still Matters in a Screen-Filled World



In a culture where so much of our connection happens through a screen—where we text instead of talk, scroll instead of sit together—it's easy to forget the quiet power of face-to-face conversation. But something essential happens

when we set down our phones and meet each other in person. It's not just about communicating more clearly; it's about being human in a fuller, more present way.

When we talk in person, we bring our whole selves into the conversation. Our eyes, hands, posture, tone of voice—all of it speaks. These nonverbal cues aren't just extras; they're central to how we understand each other. A raised eyebrow, a soft laugh, a pause between words—none of these come through in a text message. Without them, we miss the nuance that gives our communication depth. Misunderstandings happen more easily. Empathy has a harder time finding its way through.

In-person connection also builds trust in a way digital messages rarely can. There's something grounding about being in the same physical space as someone else. You hear their breath. You see their reactions in real time. These small things communicate care, and they create a foundation of trust that's hard to replicate from behind a screen. Even brief moments of real presence—looking someone in the eye, sitting through a pause together—can make a person feel seen in a way that messages and emojis never quite reach.

Conversation, too, flows more naturally when it happens face-to-face. Digital exchanges are often fragmented—typed in bursts between other tasks, delayed by distraction, cut short without closure. In-person, conversation has a rhythm. There's room for laughter that builds, for silences that deepen, for ideas that evolve together in real time. And this rhythm is where connection lives.

Importantly, face-to-face communication helps combat the very loneliness that so often drives us to our phones. **We may think we're connecting through constant messages or likes, but studies repeatedly show that heavy phone use often correlates with higher levels of anxiety and isolation.** Real-world conversation, by contrast, can release oxytocin—a hormone tied to bonding and emotion regulation. Being physically present with someone doesn't just make us feel better. It reminds us we're not alone.

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There's also something restorative about the attention that in-person dialogue requires. When we sit across from someone and really listen, we practice being present—fully, undividedly there. In a culture of constant distractions, that kind of attention is profound. And the more we practice it, the more we reclaim our capacity for empathy, patience, and connection.

Even conflict, which many of us dread, tends to resolve more kindly when we're face-to-face. It's harder to dehumanize someone when you're looking into their eyes. Tone can be softened, misunderstandings cleared, apologies felt instead of merely received as a text. The very things that make conflict difficult—emotion, intensity, vulnerability—are better supported in real-world spaces, where we can respond with full presence instead of reacting through filtered words.

At its heart, choosing in-person conversation over phone-based interaction is about honoring each other. It's a way of saying: you matter. You're worth my time, my focus, my presence. In an era where attention is fractured and presence is rare, that offering is more powerful than ever.

And maybe that's the quiet truth we forget in our hyper-connected lives: the deepest connection doesn't happen through a screen. It happens when we sit down, look up, and simply talk.

"In the age of screens, the simple act of making eye contact and having a real conversation becomes a radical act." – Brené Brown

Intentional Solitude with God: A Spiritual Practice for Modern Life

In the digital age, it is now possible to go your entire life without ever being truly alone with God. Our devices keep us tethered to the world of noise and regularly drown out the voice of God in our heart. We are starved for solitude, living through a global famine of quiet; noise refugees, seeking a new home where we can find rest in God. Solitude is not an easy path, but it is the ancient path — the Jesus path — to a strong, deep, joyful, vibrant life with God.

1. **Start small.** Start where you are, not where you “should” be. It’s counterintuitive, but the smaller the start, the better chance you have of really sticking to it and growing over time.
2. **Think subtraction, not addition.** Please do not “add” solitude into your already overbusy, overfull life. You are likely already stressed and tired. Instead, think: What can I cut out of my daily schedule? How can I slow my life down? Where can I find a little breathing room to rest and pray? Spiritual formation is about less, not more. About slowing down and simplifying your life around what matters most: life with Jesus.
3. **You get out what you put in.** The more fully you give yourself to this practice, the more lifechanging it will be; the more you just dabble with it, the more shortcuts you take, the less of an effect it will have on your transformation.
4. **Remember the J-curve.** Experts on learning tell us that whenever we set out to master a new skill, it tends to follow a J-shaped curve; we tend to get worse before we get better. You may enjoy a quiet morning before work or a lazy Sunday afternoon, but when you go into solitude, you may feel itchy or anxious or emotional. That’s okay. Expect it to be a bit awkward at first; it will get easier in time.

From *Practicing the Way*, a free spiritual formation program created by John Mark Comer that offers guidance for spiritual practices that include solitude, prayer, community, scripture, and more. practicingtheway.org/resources

“We need to find God, and he cannot be found in noise and restlessness. God is the friend of silence.” - Mother Teresa



The Art of Making Small Talk



You’re waiting in line, sitting on the bus, or in any public setting where you’re in close proximity to others. What do you do? Do you pull out your phone to avoid any awkwardness? The next time you’re in this situation, try making small talk.

Small talk often gets a bad reputation—brushed off as superficial or awkward. But when done well, it’s actually a subtle and powerful art form. It opens doors to connection, builds trust, and lays the groundwork for deeper conversations. Like a warm-up before a meaningful dialogue, small talk eases us into human connection.

At its core, small talk is about noticing and offering—sharing something light, observing the moment, or simply asking, *How’s your day going?* It might feel ordinary, but these exchanges are how we show presence. They signal openness. They remind others: *I see you. I’m here with you.*

The beauty of small talk lies in its simplicity. A comment about the weather, a compliment on someone’s scarf, or a shared laugh in the checkout line—these aren’t meaningless. They’re tiny gestures of goodwill, helping strangers become acquaintances, and acquaintances become something more.

To get better at it, listen more than you talk. Ask gentle, open-ended questions. Stay curious, not just polite. Most of all, be genuinely interested. People can feel the difference between habit and care.

Small talk doesn’t have to be profound to be meaningful. In fact, its very lightness is what makes it inviting. It’s not the conversation itself that matters most—it’s the connection it creates.



Practices to Help You Break the Cell Phone Habit

Thoughtful, practical ideas for spending less time on your phone—especially if you want to foster awareness, deepen real-world connection, and notice more of life around you.

Daily Habits & Mindful Practices

1. Set Phone-Free Zones –

Designate areas like the bedroom, dining table, or bathroom as phone-free to naturally reduce screen time.

2. Start the Day Without a Screen – Begin mornings with reading the Bible, journaling, or simply sitting with a cup of tea instead of reaching for the phone.

3. Practice Noticing – On walks or during meals, challenge yourself to observe five things you wouldn't usually notice.

4. Use Analog Alternatives – Replace digital tools with physical ones: notebooks, calendars, alarm clocks, or cookbooks.

5. Silent or Grayscale Mode – Turn your phone to grayscale or remove sound/vibration alerts to make it less stimulating.

Connection with People & Environment

6. Schedule Regular Phone Sabbaths – Take a few hours or one full day a week completely off your phone.

7. Eye Contact Challenge – Try making eye contact with people you interact with instead of glancing at your phone during pauses.

8. Write Letters or Postcards – Replace texts with occasional handwritten notes or postcards to friends or family.

9. Do “Slow” Activities with Others – Cook together, garden, play board games, or do crafts with others.

10. Attend Events Without Documentation – Go to a concert or hike without taking a single photo, focusing only on presence.

Creative & Grounding Activities

11. Start a Sketchbook or Nature Journal – Spend 10–15 minutes a day drawing or noting what you observe in your surroundings.

12. Read Physical Books or Magazines – Keep one with you for idle moments instead of defaulting to your phone.

13. Take a Daily Curiosity Walk – Wander aimlessly and pay attention to details, scents, colors, overheard snippets of life.

14. Pray or Try Breathwork – Use this time to retrain your attention inward rather than outward.

15. Practice One-Thing-at-a-Time Living – Whether washing dishes or drinking coffee, do just that one thing and savor it.

Awareness of Use & Intention

16. Track Your Screen Time Consciously – Don't just rely on built-in reports—reflect on *why* you picked up your phone each time.

17. Keep a “Phone Diary” – For a few days, log each time you pick up your phone and how it made you feel afterward.

18. Create a “Waiting Ritual” – When in line or waiting, observe your breath or look at people instead of checking your phone.

“The shortest distance between two people is a smile.” – Victor Borge



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