

Rule Your Tech or It Will Rule You

(Prior title, "Here's the best thing you can do for your life in 2017")

By **Jedd Medefind** December 30, 2016

This opinion piece is by Jedd Medefind, co-author of "Upended: How Following Jesus Remakes Your Words and Your World."

Not long ago, I helped facilitate a retreat for men in their 20s and 30s. Whenever group discussions got raw and real, the subject of technology kept popping up, seemingly from nowhere. Finally, my co-leader held up his hands. "Okay, let's get this out there. How many of you would honestly say technology is a major problem in your marriage?" Every guy in the room raised his hand.

It was clear a nerve had been touched, and we began digging. For most of the guys, the main issue seemed to be work technology invading home: checking email in every pause, texting at the dinner table, tackling projects on the laptop in bed. Many also admitted that Web surfing and TV gobbled an awful lot of their time, especially for news and sports. Conversely, many men felt their wives let social media be just as invasive. "If I stop with email, she'll just be checking Facebook or Pinterest," one fellow said wryly.

Whatever the particulars, all seemed to feel that technology had come to pervade and subtly change even their most intimate moments — perhaps irredeemably.

None of us need the latest how-many-hours-do-people-spend-online statistic to know that communication technology now invades every crack and crevice of life. Like a home built in a dense jungle, the only thing necessary for life to be consumed by the creeping vines is to not resist them. Technology invades unless prevented.

This need not make us tech-haters. We all have been baptized into the blessings of convenience, comfort and control unimaginable to history's greatest emperors, kings and czars. Let's affirm our technologies — many of them at least — with grateful hearts.

But still, every new technology carries a fundamental question: will we use the technology for our purposes, or vice versa? In other words, will we set the parameters of a technology's place and effects in our life? Or, will forces beyond us — designers,

advertisers, fellow users and other interests — decide when, where and how that technology will shape our lives? If we want that decision-maker to be us, we must opt in to the role. The default option for control is *them*.

But how do we take on that responsibility: actively, thoughtfully determining both the positive role of technology in our lives and setting its boundaries?

The ancient monastic tradition called a “rule” offers a simple, compelling way to set those boundaries. In monastic communities, a rule represents a voluntary commitment to do and not do particular things. It is a decision, made in a time of clarity, that helps guide choices the rest of the time. Rules turn intentions into specific commitments, commitments into actions, actions into habits and habits into a way of life.

It could be argued that most, perhaps all, ancient rules held one primary purpose: attention. As the rule of St. Benedict enjoins, amid noise and disturbance, we learn to listen “with the ear of our hearts.” A rule helps us give ourselves — our *full presence* — to the one thing most important in that moment, whether a friend or prayer or a task. A rule becomes a sea wall against distraction and constrains even some good-but-secondary things so that we can focus on what matters most.

Certainly, a rule can become cold legalism. But a rule simply acknowledges that to live the way we want to live, humans need something with more backbone than in-the-moment willpower can provide. We can draw immense help from commitments that provide railings for our real-time decisions. Within these mapped-out boundaries, we are actually *more* free to be and do what deep down we most desire.

So what would a rule look like for our relationship with technology today? I suspect it will appear a bit different for everyone. But whatever the details, the rule would allow us to set basic parameters for when, where and how we use our technology. We can harness technology’s strength without it dictating the terms.

To get your brainstorming started, here are a few of the commitments I have chosen for my “Rule”:

- No text or email from the time I arrive home until the kids are in bed. (*This is precious time I don’t want diluted by distraction.*)
- No text or email from waking till after a time of prayer and reflection. (*I enter the day quieted, with a clearer sense of what matters most.*)
- No checking work email immediately before bed. (*Why start my mind gnawing on tomorrow’s office crisis as I lay my head on the pillow?*)
- No looking at a smartphone while sharing a meal or conversation with my wife, children or anyone else. (*If I need to read or respond to a message, I’ll get up and do it out of eyesight to preserve the intimacy of our personal interactions.*)

- I will limit TV/movie watching to X number of nights per week and use social media as little as possible. *(This helps us resist the mindless drift toward “watching life” instead of living it.)*
- I will take a “Tech Sabbath” each week, usually on Sunday. *(This also has varied — from no email to no screens all day. Having one day a week “off the grid” is invaluable — and gives a fresh reminder of what life is all about.)*
- I will batch process emails. (I do my best not to take “quick hits” of the email pipe every 10 minutes. Instead I try to set specific times to do email in chunks. I also go the first hour of each workday without looking at email — prioritizing the strategic over the urgent.)

Of course, your rule may look quite different. But with even a little thoughtfulness and intentionality, a tech rule can alter your daily rhythms — subtly but profoundly. It can put you back in control of your machines and yields new vitality to your relationships, creativity and spiritual health.

You’ll become more deeply present to others, more focused on things you care about, and calmer even under strain. No longer will Silicon Valley designers, Madison Avenue marketers, Indian programmers or creators of mindless content determine how you live. You’ll be the boss — and technology will be your servant — not the other way around.

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