Responding to Need

Technology, it seems, is not so much solving many human problems as it is multiplying them. Congress has done little on information it has had for years now. We need to pause perhaps and reassert decisions about the ways we use our time—before others approve and speed forward with "innovations" promising to "assist" us. The optics, branding, and non-stop spectacle that keeps us entertained subsumes us within the power of a virtual imperialism that is antithetical not only to critical thinking, but also to engaging in hard work that built and is said to sustain democracy itself. If we pull back the curtain of excessive materialism and entertainment that advertising insists on selling us in order to amass more profits, we might glimpse what the industry, back in its formative years, sought to replace—that is, a sense of self-worth grounded in one's values and beliefs. These need to be *renewed* if we are to advance our humanity along with reasonable uses of AI. Whether Covid-19 was a cause or the cause, the pandemic thrust the rising rates of suicide to center-front of our concerns so that mental health issues were talked about more openly. Three factors amplified this change: 1. young people breaking the stigma around mental health, 2. a very proactive surgeon general who has brought a sense of urgency to addressing the issue, and 3. parents, schools, and communities *coming together* to share creative ideas and resources in response to the crisis. Chef Andrés began World Central Kitchen when he witnessed an initial lack of response to human need after Hurricane Katrina. Today more and more people are coming together and re-connecting with each other in positive ways that make use of relationships–the resource that Murthy says is hiding in plain sight. Young people were the first to break open the stigma about keeping silent, and their lead in discussing mental health openly has been a vastly positive move because talking about suicide is a way to prevent it. In fact, The American Federation for Suicide Prevention holds a yearly Out of Darkness Walk to raise funds and awareness and reduce stigma precisely for this reason—to talk with others openly about suicide. During the 2021 summer Olympics in Tokyo, some young and top athletes also opened up about their mental health.

Tokyo's most famous athlete, four time, Grand Slam tennis star Naomi Osaka, pulled out of the tournament entirely, saying she experiences "huge waves of anxiety" before meeting with the media and revealing she has "suffered long bouts of depression.[40] Yes, there was disappointment, but most praised Osaka for being forthcoming about her story: "'It's O.K. to not be O.K.'" read the July 19/26, 2021 double issue of *Time* magazine.[41] Olympic gold medalist Simone Manuel failed to qualify for the Olympic team. Manuel, 24, said she'd been diagnosed with "over- training syndrome, a type of athletic burnout."[42] Simone Biles, "the most decorated gymnast of all time" and gold medalist favorite, withdrew from several of the Olympic events, saying she wanted to preserve her own mental wellness.[43] Two years later, having recovered from her experience with the "twisties," she reported feeling in her best form ever and went on to win her 8th National Championship.[44] So during the pandemic years when we were forced into isolation, mental health moved clearly into the spotlight. More and more individuals broke the silence, admitting to insecurities and less-than-perfect and mostly online personas. After mentioning experiences with insomnia, superstar Beyoncé may have been speaking of a new awareness in all of us when she said, "Mental health is self-care, too."[45] A formidable advocate for the young, Surgeon General Vivek Murthy applauds young people for taking the lead in talking about their own mental health struggles as a way to change "culture and perception."[46] He acknowledges it is not always easy to talk with parents, especially parents such as his own, who "came from a culture that didn't necessarily understand what mental health was."[47] But it is still important for a young person to talk with others. School counselors play "a vital role," though Murthy is quick to add, "We don't have enough school counselors in our schools."[48] The surgeon general established priorities for addressing "Youth Behavioral Health Initiatives," and writes that, "while technology promises to connect us, it can also isolate…we are still ashamed of feeling lonely."[49] These ideas are developed in his "Advisory on Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation."[50] Murthy states, "Digital environments should be further evaluated, particularly how online interactions can potentially hinder meaningful connections[51] and has elsewhere said he thinks thirteen is too young to be on social media.[52] **Jonathan Haidt, a social psychologist at New York University, agrees and says,** "If you get users when they're young…there's a good chance it'll stay on for life. Everybody's competing for the teenagers."[53]

Miss James, one of these young teens, states it could be a "misconception" that the isolation of Covid disrupted her generation the way it did even younger, grade school generations because, for the "so-called digital generation… 95% of our communication was *already* done through social media."[54] From her work in both technology and social sciences at MIT, Sherry Turkle was one of the first to notice the seductive nature of technology's "promises" to connect us with an online world as a "place where loneliness can be defeated."[55] Turkle recognized that "digital connections…offer connection with uncertain claims to commitment."[56] She observed that by avoiding 'real time' commitments of in-person conversation, "we use technologies to dial down human contact, to titrate its nature and extent. People are comforted by being in touch with a lot of people whom they also keep at bay."[57] In which case, loneliness is not so much overcome as it is masked. Even before COVID-19 cut off many from friends and loved ones, Murthy found health risks in nearly half of all U.S. adults.[58] "Research has shown that loneliness and isolation are linked to sleep problems, inflammation and immune changes in younger adults."[59] In older people, they're tied to symptoms such as "pain, insomnia, depression, anxiety and shorter life span. In people of all ages, they may be associated with higher risks of heart disease, stroke, diabetes, addiction, suicidality and self-harm, and dementia."[60] Before 2019, one in five suffered depression; by 2022, the number increased 50%.[61] On Nov. 17, 2022, a *Washington Post* columnist and guest commentator on the *PBS NewsHour*, Michael Gerson, died from cancer at age 58. *PBS NewsHour* reprinted a guest sermon Gerson had given three years earlier at the Washington National Cathedral in which he revealed a battle with depression—and his courage. Gerson saw depression as a "metaphor for the human condition."[62] He found consolation in the stories of Lazarus—someone dead to the world, but who is returned to life–and a prodigal son who squanders much of his life, yet is welcomed home with open arms. Depression is common after a stroke "due to the stress of the event and to chemical changes in the brain that make it difficult to feel positive emotions."[63] In February, 2023, Sen. John Fetterman (D-PA) revealed he was treated for depression after suffering a stroke the year before he won a highly competitive race for the Pennsylvania Senate.[64]

An aide to the senator said "the senator has wrestled with questions about his self-worth,"[65] struggles that seem common to both adults and young people who experience depression. Nuala Mullen recalls, "On social media, everyone posts the highlights of their life. No one acknowledges what's happening behind the screen…People probably thought I was the happiest then, but it was one of the worst times of my life."[66] Brigham Young University's David Wood finds suicides among veterans, age 28-35, are "2.5 times higher than in the general population, and up 41% from the previous year" due to loss of connections, recklessness with firearms, and *moral injury*–experiences that either "undermine one's sense of worth or violate one's values."[67] As for Fetterman, the public seemed to appreciate the senator for being "accessible," "brave," "empathic," and "very Gen Z."[68]After six weeks of treatment, Fetterman is back at work. His doctors advise "staying away from cable television news and social media."[69] Dr. Joanna Moncrieff—a founding member of the Critical Psychiatry Network, a group of psychiatrists who are skeptical of the mental-health establishment, has conducted research that, along with the work of others, suggests "depression isn't caused by low serotonin levels, at least not entirely. And if serotonin isn't the main problem, Moncrieff says, taking these drugs is 'not correcting a chemical imbalance. It is creating a chemical imbalance.'"[70] Moncrieff believes therapists helping people solve problems in their lives is a better way to treat depression. Studies, including the 2019 research review on psychiatric treatments, show more positive results with 'problem-solving therapy,' an approach that teaches people ways to deal with stress and to assume accountability for improving their own mental health.[71] For example, the Cleveland Clinic provides information about meditation and yoga breathing that allow self-healing, being in the moment. These methods have been found to be "as effective as a medical drug used to treat anxiety."[72] Research also shows one of the "best predictors of success in therapy" is the "relationship between patient and provider." The presence of human bonds are reintroduced, a connection with lived and practice-based evidence.[73] But it is expensive, not available in all areas of the country, and many counselors do not take insurance. Since the system, too, cannot keep pace with technological overload and is, therefore, out of step "with a young person's internal exploration and suffering," it becomes easier just to prescribe pills.[74] Currently, we lean more on the medical drugs because "solving problems is more difficult and the psychiatric system…is more focused on getting people diagnosed, medicated, and out the door."[75]

Jamie Ducharme writes that what is growing more in a "for-profit system struggling to meet demand" are "brief meetings on teletherapy apps, where things can easily slip through the cracks," and make it "difficult for providers to diagnose accurately, establish rapport with patients, and provide holistic care."[76] We may need to use teletherapy apps as a transitional aide, especially, for example, in schools or other places where there simply are not enough counselors or therapists. But if we look to them as long-term solutions, we fool only ourselves—about something young people are already savvy to. Some addiction treatment centers are now turning big profits… by scaling back care—when the purpose was to *supplement* the currently *inadequate* numbers of counselors. As with the pandemic, there may be no shortcut–no easy fix. If we want more effective, holistic treatment, we may need more time-intensive, person-to-person counseling and mentoring that draws on professional and human compassion to work with one another, including personal problem-solving in the healing process.[77] As one young person said, "It takes a lot of work to actually learn how to speak and be honest and open with myself."[78] Murthy tells CNN's Erin Burnett, he thinks the masking seen on social media is the same way we hide our loneliness, which is also "a great masquerader: It can look like different things…Some become withdrawn. Others become irritable and angry."[79] "If you feel lonely, you pick up the phone and call a friend, and then it goes away, or you get in the car and go see a family member, that's OK. That's loneliness acting like hunger or thirst, a signal our body sends us when we need something for survival. It's when it persists that it becomes harmful."[80] Therefore, social media is certainly not the only way humans mask their feelings, but Nuala Mullen's statement shows to what extent young people's socialization is occurring in and at the hands of an immersive technology: "Without social media…I would be completely left off. I mean, I could get off the app, sure, yes, but then I wouldn't be able to talk to my friends. I wouldn't be able to make plans. I wouldn't be able to see what people are doing. And in this day and age, it's so hard to stay off of it because everyone's life revolves around it.[81] These comment speaks to an urgent need to reimagine community centers for our young people. John Yang interviews Laurie Santos, cognitive scientist and psychology professor at Yale University, who comments on fewer so-called third places where people can meet with other friends, like bowling leaks.

These kinds of things have gone away in the modern day, but we can bring them back. We can take action to make those kinds of collective social connections as well."[82] Community centers might offer places for people to socialize in person, to hold potluck meals, play board games, plan bike rides for fun or for causes, get help with homework and/or job apps, learn yoga or karate, plan hiking trips, listen to amateur musicians jam, dance, and/or engage in service learning programs. Such centers might further help people organize and serve rotating community needs such as helping with recycling, learning to garden, participating in interactive art projects or exercise classes—and even discussing mental health resilience with a vetted mentor or two nearby. Community centers could be a place for some meet-ups, which may be a more positive use of technology because they move from screen to in-person interaction. Ruth Simmons grew up in a segregated part of Texas to become a distinguished educator, "president of three colleges, [and] the first African American to head an Ivy League university."[83] Recounting her childhood, Simmons says when she was 6, "her family moved to Houston's predominantly Black Fifth Ward" and she walked across the street to Hester House, a place that even now "serves seniors … teens [are also] here in a dramatic karate display, and children [take] part in a variety of after-school programs."[84] Simmons now says Hester House saved her and other family members. What a remarkable community accomplishment—one we need more of. Masking loneliness and our need for human connections is why the surgeon general believes we must rebuild a social infrastructure that helps more people—by investing in coming together proactively, to strengthen ourselves and our democracy. Murthy suggests, for example, checking on what one or more neighbors might need, calling to let one or more person who lives alone know they are thought of, and holding a "neighbors' table" where others in the community are invited over for a meal, something he says has resulted in "many beautiful friends."[85] Eboo Patel's metaphor for America as a potluck dinner (2c) works nicely here since most enjoy international foods and sharing those meals coincides with the idea of a "neighbors' table." Sharing food with each other is a way we share our cultures and ourselves.[86]

Those adventurers who choose to journey across the globe have commented that is individuals sharing what little they have with complete strangers that strengthens their belief in humanity. Therefore, in response to the American "epidemic of loneliness and isolation" and to help increase social connections as a way to "mend the social fabric of our nation," the surgeon general has put out a National Strategy to Advance Social Connection.[87] Murthy wasted no time spreading the message that mental health was "the defining public health challenge of our time" and "now needs to be primary health."[88] He approved a 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline call number set up to address anyone's "mental health and related distress" or "who may need crisis support."[89] The framework of the surgeon general's advisory, published May 3, 2023 at hhs.gov is comprehensive and pragmatic–rooted in six pillars, and there is a role for each of us to play.[90] The first involves equitable access to strengthening the social and physical infrastructures, such as volunteer groups, libraries, and green spaces.[91] "The second pillar calls for policymakers focusing on reducing disparities, serving all communities."[92] "The third…calls for increased investment in…local solutions to educate health care providers about the physical and mental benefits of social connection and the risks ofdisconnection."[93] "Murthy's fourth pillar singles out the "tangible impact" of technology. He calls for more data transparency from tech firms, as well as standards to safeguard the well-being of its users.[94] The fifth pillar urges all stakeholders to address gaps in data by collaborating on research.[95] The final pillar "urges a culture of connection in which Americans 'cultivate values of kindness, respect, service, and commitment to one another.' Everyone can use their voice to emphasize these values, and our institutions should invest in demonstrating them."[96] *Newsweek* published an opinion of the Surgeon General's Advisory with a critique that offers insight into underlying socio-economic factors that further complicate the problem facing us. The authors begin by referencing Johann Hari's 2018 book *Lost Connections* in which loneliness "is not merely about social isolation from other people. It flows from multiple kinds of disempowerment," and this "manifestation of a state of disconnection [is] the result of a half century of economic displacement and disempowerment in pursuit of ever-greater profits."[97]

Like Pope Francis, the authors challenge greed as "the way that prosperity is achieved [despite] other successful models [that] exist, especially in Europe and the global South."[99] Whether called the solidarity economy, the social economy, or something else, this popular movement is a mix of mostly smaller but highly relational businesses. Many operate as workers' cooperatives with democratic governance and self-management. As a result, workers find themselves empowered and engaged.[100] These work cooperatives are similar to those in minority cultures as well as where the "little guys" of society have indeed found meaningful–places where other women and men, as well as social, and religious leaders like Rev. Barber often urge us to work *across categories* and in solidarity with each other (see 3b.) The pope calls on the young to build "a different kind of economy," based on greater care for the poor and environment: As long as a "system 'produces' discarded people, and we operate according to it, we will be accomplices of an economy that kills."[101] Because the pope sees work as integral to human dignity, he adds: "Perhaps our response should not be based on how much we can do, but on how we are able to open new paths so that the poor themselves can become protagonists of change."[102] Equally important to such work models, Corbin and Joe Waters write that "solidarity-based enterprises…including cooperatively owned social care services such as child care, elder care, and care for the disabled, offer some of the highest-quality care available" and "a wealth of still little known models of innovation in the fields of public health and community well-being."[103] It is not necessary to oppose or exclude *either* set of ideas because the problem is urgent enough that we can draw from best practices that incorporate both Murthy's and Waters' ideas. For example, Murthy's third pillar could be used as evidence of need for paid family leave, child care, and better maternity health care for all women. Here, the "community-based behavioral care" startup that Ducharme references might nicely complement Waters' goals: "A startup focused on community-based behavioral care" looks to changes like "improving access to affordable housing, education, and job training; building out community spaces and peer support programs; and increasing the availability of fresh food and green space—all of which can have profound effects on well-being, as can more simple tools like meditation and mindfulness."[104]

These changes may be precisely what give hope to Gen Z and younger generations, many of whom have simply disconnected from the "pursuit of ever-greater profits" in and for only itself. We also need a more healthy skepticism before buying into each of technology's "innovations," or dressed-up advertisements. Instead we might look for prior evidence of work in communities and voting records. The sixth pillar calls on all of us to hold accountable those who are in positions of authority to "model healthy connections" and "invest in demonstrating them"—rather than the attack modes so often seen in congressional "investigations" and, more recently, to win elections. Murthy lays out practical steps that policymakers can take to address the crisis of loneliness and isolation. They include… extending more support to community organizations [like Hester House, libraries, and child care centers] that can often be the lifeline of creating connections in our various towns and cities."[105] There is indeed a role for *everyone* to play. In the U.S., school boards have become a catch all site for pent up frustrations with the pandemic and political anger. In Ohio, in 2021, a record 2,600 candidates vied for election to a school board![106] If we remember to hear each other, to listen with the same consideration we want for ourselves, we may have a better chance to understand each other's ideas and then address issues locally—at the level where we are often most personally impacted—rather than with one-size-fits-all, national solutions. This is why, perhaps one of the most creative and most hopeful responses to Murthy's Advisory is the example of what the National Governors' Association is doing with it. After a brief statement about the "successful convening" of the association, introducing themselves and acknowledging each other's wives, Chair Philip Murphy of New Jersey and Vice-Chair Spencer Cox of Utah shocked this reader by beginning with something that seems anachronistic for our times… that is, a moment of good humor: "Amen. And for the record, nobody called anybody else a liar." [107] "They did not."[108] Chair Murphy (D-NJ) began: "Mental health among our youth, infant and maternal health…. a great discussion, I thought….I wish America could have a lens into the discussions we have among Democratic and Republican governors….it is respectful, even when we are not agreeing, and it produces results."[109]

Vice-Chair Cox (R-UT) responded: "There is so much of a toxic divide in our country around all things political….we really liked each other, and we find ways to work together….To see Republicans and Democrats coming together to work on this very important issue… learning best practices from each other….And yes, red states learn from blue states and blue states learn from red states."[110] What a wonderful example for what hopefully will lead to follow-up discussions at school boards and state and city councils across the nation–including what some states might want as "roadmaps for veterans."[111] Spencer Cox (R-UT) spoke about Utah seeming to be working for a holistic approach to mental health issues and creating an app in conjunction with the University of Utah's mental health resources: "At the push of a button, any student in the state of Utah will immediately be in contact with a mental health professional."[112] They can have a conversation or report someone else who may be having thoughts of suicide. "They can also report anonymously any other types of dangerous activity that is happening in their school. We have prevented several school shootings….because kids knew and had ability to communicate with the adults in the school to let them know something was happening."[113] This is truly an innovative idea because while it draws on the technology of our times, it uses that technology to link young people with other human, beings, i.e., those responsible for helping them at times of mental health and/or active shooter situations. It does indeed draw from the best of both worlds to create a best practice and provides reason for hope. Like the surgeon general, participants in this conference seem committed to the idea that "the health of society is dependent on the health of our relationships," on practice-based evidence and not merely compiling data. The governors formed relationships and were unafraid to cross political lines.[114]They modeled a cooperation that generates trust as well as reciprocity and a sense of belonging. More families, schools, and communities now also seek to actively address mental health by re-pairing human connections. Such actions allow us to serve for one another as Murthy's "buffer to health problems while making communities more resilient."[116]

Eric A. Zillmer, PsyD,, a licensed clinical psychologist of Neuropsychology at Drexel University who has worked with tennis star Serena Williams, comments, "Resilience…enables people to actually grow through adversity…. it's about treating yourself well, building both mental strength and mental flexibility… cultivating a sense of purpose and belonging.[117] Murthy identifies small steps that "can make a difference in how connected we feel…. just spending 15 minutes a day with people we care about, making sure that we're fully present when we're interacting with others, and we're not distracted by technology… recognizing that small acts of service can be powerful in making us feel more connected with one another."[118] Justin Baker, the clinical director of the Suicide and Trauma Reduction Initiative (STRIVE) says, "People often incorrectly assume that disclosing painful truths or emotions with a trusted other will be a turn off or perceived as a burden. Quite the opposite typically occurs. Instead of feeling like a burden, sharing a common struggle typically brings people together and strengthens the existing relationship."[119] Parents are advised to discuss early and often mental health issues with their children—to spend time together, set aside time for screen-free socializing, and engage in constructive conflict resolution. [120] They can validate their children's experiences and let children know parents don't have all the answers either. Engaging in conversations on art or writing letters to and from each other, but without pressure, sometimes leads to breakthroughs in communication, especially with young adults. Schools can equip teens with some essential, practical skills, such as feeling okay about asking for what they might need. An introduction to time management helps prevent students from overloading themselves with work they will not be able to complete or do their best in, and which can then lead to discouragement and/or dropping classes. Teens can take steps to help prevent suicide if they see warning signs in a friend, encourage a friend to seek expert help; go with the friend, if needed, to talk with a trusted adult.[121] Volunteers who called or visited elderly patients reported patients telling them their outreach gave socially isolated seniors "more reason to live." Without loving connections to family or friends, they had simply grown less interested in living life.[122] Responding to the needs of the socially isolated gives, in turn, more purpose to *our* lives. Robert Putnam of Harvard University says, "Such gestures are anything but empty; rather, they can generate social capital and thereby lead us to a feeling of greater responsibility to one another and our surrounding communities."[123]

More social connection with others can also be gained by shopping in local stores rather than only online. The few moments of conversation and perhaps commenting on items looked for adds a small amount of human contact to what is otherwise shopping alone. Even though many now check out their own goods at grocery and other stores, the brief conversations between shoppers and associates makes for a bit of human contact in conducting what is otherwise almost all self-service errands. Research shows volunteering—simply helping others–not only reduces loneliness but also has "positive impact on mental health and physical health, reducing the risk of mortality and lowering feelings of depression."[124] NBC's Kate Snow is an advocate for volunteering as a cure for loneliness. It creates space to reconnect with others and with a purpose larger than one's self,[126] and practicing service and gratitude encourages others to do the same."[127] "Big Brothers and Big Sisters now operate in 12 countries. In the past year, they have mentored two million young people around the world."[128] Lacy Wilkins volunteers with Americorps in Springfield, Mass, to help mentor kids in high school. "She says going out to help others saved her: 'I feel like I'm getting up, doing my part… like I'm giving back.'"[129] Linda Mason volunteer at Hand-on in Hartford, Connecticut, a non-profit that never turns away those who cannot pay for a meal. "When I come here I feel purpose," she says. "When I leave I feel happiness"[130] A resource developed by Mind Chicago was adopted in Florida that uses the brain and the body, each helping the other, interchangeably. It provides guidelines that emphasize young people can learn "to take care of their minds by taking care of their bodies: **SEEDS**… stands for **S**leep, **E**xercise, **E**ducation, **D**iet, and **S**elf-care" all of which can increase confidence, boost self-esteem, and reduce feelings of sadness."[131] Finally, some non-profits are beginning to revitalize efforts in local journalism that re-connect citizens in their communities and inform people of the politics that are right around them. Hopefully, that effort to support local news will grow, because when we hear only national news, our polarized politics consume a *disproportionate* amount of our mental energies, and we seem less likely to form independent opinions. We have not benefited as people from human connections being disconnected and replaced with digitized substitutes. The internet's anonymity is a double-edged sword–giving voice to those marginalized, but also a megaphone to sick and predatory elements in society.

Social media can be toxic, and human relationships are suffering as a result. Rather than broadening our knowledge of the world, we cling more and more to ideas reinforced in isolated, fragmented silos, replaying again and again the same areas of our mental bandwidths. Murthy holds that "social connection is as essential to humanity as food, water or shelter. Humans have historically needed to rely on each other for survival, and modern people remain wired for that connection and proximity to others."[133] A young teen seems to agree: "We are social beings as teenagers. You crave the deeper connection, the kind you only get through in-person interaction."[134] Given that essential need, "despite current advancements that now allow us to live without engaging with others (e.g., food delivery, automation, remote entertainment)," Murthy maintains "our biological need to connect remains."[135] Dr. Lena Wen, former Baltimore City public health commissioner and a professor of public health at George Washington University, sums up addiction as "a disease of isolation," and like Murthy, she believes, "recovery depends on relationships."[136] Pope Francis discerns the limits to relying only, or primarily, on online relationships: "Technology can do much. It teaches us the 'what' and the 'how': but it does not tell us the 'why,'" he says, "and so our actions become sterile and do not bring fulfillment to life."[137] We might have known before the pandemic that we were dealing with an epidemic of mental health issues, but in what ways were we *responding* to it, as, for example, when Chef Andrés saw a need to respond and offer hope after Hurricane Katrina? The surgeon general finds "'our relationships are a source of healing and well-being hiding in plain sight–one that can help us live healthier, more fulfilled, and more productive lives.'"[138] At the start of the pandemic, Pope Francis wrote, "A crisis reveals what is in our hearts. To come out of this crisis better than we went in we must let ourselves be touched by others' pain."[139] The pandemic thrust mental health into the open, so that each of us has become more aware of the need in all of us for more empathy and greater compassion. Being neighbor to each other, perhaps the way Hawaiians see all as part of their family, the *aloha* spirit, a more human-centric, social infrastructure can be built. This counsel is found again and again in humanity's religions and books of wisdom.

Perhaps it is there to warn us about the diseases of hatred or indifference that can spread inside of us. And what disease has ever been so simple to heal as to care for others in the ways each of us wishes to be cared about? To feel the pain of others? To walk alongside real life friends, even if cell phones *are* in our pockets? We want more technology because we have been conditioned *always to want* more. Recall that in this new era of technology, innovations are often sold to us—not as things we want–but as things we did not even know we "*needed*"! Critical thinking must be used to recognize that fallacy of the advertising industry. If social media is like a tobacco or opioid of our psyches, then it cannot also be solution to the problem. Behind the seductive nature of tech's promises is hidden the lure of advertising profits. And neither the lure of limitless greed, nor the promise of the industry's mantra that "we are what we buy" are going to disappear just because we agree to replace human connections with digital ones. We will either come to our senses or–view the alienation that divides us with screens as "something we didn't even know we needed." Not surprisingly, Snapchat influencers have launched an AI-powered "friend" to help cure,[140]–of all things–loneliness. According to Murthy, "Reporting that you feel lonely is like smoking 15 cigarettes a day in terms of its impact on our health and our well-being."[141]Then he urges us to see that "Given the 'significant health consequences of loneliness and isolation, the nation must prioritize building social connection the same way we have prioritized other critical public health issues such as tobacco, obesity, and substance use disorders.'"[142] The Mayo Clinic reinforces those findings: "The health risks of a lack of social connection can be just as high as the health risks of obesity, smoking, physical inactivity or excessive alcohol consumption.[143] Murthy has already called for digital warning labels on social media akin to warning labels on tobacco. He states clearly: "Social media use among adolescents is associated with mental health harms," and "for many of our kids, the harms outweigh the benefits."[144] The question now is will Congress act? We can seek to "transform" our lives by spending more money to buy what today's influencers peddle, which will reinforce the advertising industry's underlying mantra that self-worth is "what we buy." But since the pandemic, many—both the young and adults–have discovered they are not seeking more of that which does not satisfy, i.e., more data, more screens, or more technology.

Rather, they are trying to decide in favor of more interpersonal interactions. Some resilient individuals are helping to lead the way… *away* from blind belief in technology and towards more interaction with the human bonds that better sustain us. Steve Hartman's, whose "Steve Hartman on the Road" segments on CBS Nightly News, is repeatedly able to uncover overlooked acts of kindness in all kinds of people and situations. Hartman is convinced "any number more than one act of kindness can change the planet" because, like the ripple effect of a stone tossed into water, the one act of kindness goes viral.[145] He is not alone in that observation. Great Britain's Queen Elizabeth was savvy to world politics and also weathered many dysfunctional matters common to ordinary families while yet upholding dignity and the duty of the tradition she was born into. A world grateful for her 70-year lifetime of service might take to heart her suggestion "not to underestimate the collective power of kindness."[146] And the *Harvard Business Review* reads, "In workplaces where acts of kindness become the norm, the spillover effects can multiply fast. When people receive an act of kindness, they pay it back, research shows–and not just to the same person, but often to someone entirely new. This leads to a culture of generosity in an organization…. The power of kindness can mitigate the ill effects of our increasingly online social world."[147]