

# Empty technique

by [Wes D. Avram](#) in the [July 4, 2001](#) issue

*Transforming Our Days: Spirituality, Community and Liturgy in a Technological Culture.* By Richard Gaillardetz. Crossroad, 158 pp., \$15.95.

The fan on my 25-year-old gas furnace gave way on Christmas weekend. After scrounging space heaters, trying to explain to toddlers why they were cold, and guessing which pipes might burst without attention, I called a 24-hour repair service. "Don't worry, you don't need a fan right now," said one, "just run the thing and let the heat radiate." Another contradicted him, telling me I risked cracks in the furnace's seams and toxic fumes in the house. The stakes seemed high. The advice givers finally convinced me that technological improvements had rendered my "old" furnace hopelessly obsolete; total replacement was the only option.

Who can argue with the promise of technology? A new furnace would be smaller, safer, more efficient, more reliable, give "better" heat and pay for itself in four years. A little research on the Internet, a quick financing deal with a furnace manufacturer, an afternoon's work by an efficient crew and a debt of \$2,600 later, we were back in business.

The same logic that had placed the furnace in that basement in the first place argued as strenuously for its replacement. And there lies the essence of technologized decision-making: the same techniques whose opacity leaves us helpless in the face of nature are also the techniques we depend on to cure our helplessness. And in these techniques lies an unexamined promise of progressive disburdenment. This promise drives our economics, our relationships and, too often, our religion. We seek remedies in increasingly complex and mysterious machines, whether those machines be furnaces, high-speed Internet connections or HMOs. Albert Borgmann has called this logic the "device paradigm," in which a good is removed from the actual labor required for its production and becomes a commodity.

During our furnace ordeal, I remembered the September parties given by folks in Maine who still heat their houses with wood. A load of wood is chopped or delivered,

then stacked in ordered rows by gatherings of neighbors, often according to traditional patterns. A little drink and a meal fuels the gathering. The first fire is stoked in early October, and for the next few months families order their lives around the rhythms of feeding the wood stove. There's pride in those woodpiles, and a nuanced knowledge of what warmth means. I lack that knowledge.

The practice of heating homes with wood produces social goods, meanings that mark family and neighborhood life in ways hard to explain. Implicit in these is an intrigue of chill and warmth that reminds us of our dependence on nature precisely because of the work it requires for warmth to triumph. A technologized commodity, on the other hand, doesn't appear to result from human effort. Comfort comes from a device whose perfection requires, like my furnace, ubiquity and uniformity (heat in every room at a constant temperature, operated the same way from house to house); instant and efficient access (continually perfected and easy); and relative safety and reliability (allowing us to forget the device once it is turned on).

The kind of heat my friends knew in Maine, however burdening it was to generate, gathers identity, sociality and meaning around itself. In that sense, it is a thing. The heat I'm buying from the Bryant furnace company and my local gas company is, in that sense, nothing. It disappears, except when the machine breaks or the bill arrives. We can't, therefore, simply call it a more efficient version of what happens in Maine.

Technologies are fundamentally changing the ways we relate to things and things relate us to each other, and the very status of what counts as things for us. For anyone who would take a moment to reflect on this, Richard Gaillardetz's little book is a helpful companion. It belongs to an underdeveloped genre critical of our wholesale accommodation to technology. Writers like Wendell Berry, Bill McKibben and Kathleen Norris present a kind of agrarian, wistful critique in the tradition of Thoreau. Those like Sherry Turkle, Camile Paglia and Tex Sample roam through the cultural implications of new technologies to find complexities worth either criticizing or celebrating.

Gaillardetz joins a lesser noticed subgroup who present carefully argued philosophical approaches. Names such as Jaques Ellul, Ivan Illich, Carl Mitcham and Borgmann come to mind. These thinkers try to take us beneath the effect of the technologies themselves to the kind of fundamental rationality that makes them both so attractive and so frightening. Gaillardetz makes this kind of interpretation

accessible to a wide audience, and he brings it into serious dialogue with Christian theology. In particular, he focuses on Borgmann's work, relating it to the theology of Karl Rahner, among others. The result is a revelation. *Transforming Our Days* helps us to see what choices we yet might have on the path of technology.

Gaillardetz discusses the hyperreality of an information technology more brilliant, more rich, more pliable than experiences in "ordinary" time. Technology has taken us to what Ivan Illich has called an "age of the show," in which we peer through the blinds into formerly private places. We live as though we're constantly watching ourselves and others, without the dispositions of shame or respect. And, according to Gaillardetz, we find ourselves caught in a "voyeuristic semblance of intimacy without the vulnerability." Our fundamental ideas of "the natural" or "the real" are altered. Gaillardetz contrasts the multitasking of technologically mediated life with the thicker multidimensionality of communal engagement.

By selling the church as little more than a service-providing agency that adds "value" to our lives, we succumb to the device paradigm, Gaillardetz believes. We too easily give the semblance of religious intimacy without the vulnerability of full participation in Christian life. We encourage an "episodic spirituality--in which religious experience is simply a subset of human experience." We reduce religion to a commodity among commodities.

As an alternative to this kind of "solitary theism," Gaillardetz proposes a rediscovery of full-bodied "relational" trinitarianism. As the three persons of the Trinity relate in each other, there is an outpouring of Love that commingles with all that is. This love is not a product or a device but a thing that makes and remakes us in its image. Gaillardetz reminds us of the reasons why Christian thought imagines the world differently than technology does. Cause and effect mix into context, and ways of living foster a different set of purposes than mere disburdenment. The means by which we live are indistinguishable from the ends of liberating worship.

Gaillardetz proposes a new "mystagogy" of ordinary experience, in which we rediscover the things, actions, disciplines and decisions that make faith different from a commodity (it is here that Rahner appears). To counter technology, liturgy must become both the central concern of the church and the central topic of theology, for it is liturgy and its broad ethical claims, rooted by trinitarian affirmations, that holds the potential for reshaping the postmodern imagination. And it is the practices of living implied by liturgical participation that provide "occasions

for grace."

Gaillardetz imagines the church as a community of "mystagogues," attuned, disciplined, perceptive and nimble. The recent increase in writings about the Trinity, eucharistic theology, revision in worship and liturgical renewal, and the recovery of virtue ethics suggests he is not alone in this belief. While this interest surely speaks of essential disagreements about these things, it may also suggest that we are grabbing for lifelines in the flood. And we may be doing this across the whole church, spontaneously discovering that the theological imagination that comes with a return to these themes may bring clues for a new way forward. It is also here that Gaillardetz is most Catholic, by centering his proposal in sacramental theology and a robust mystagogy. He challenges his church to face the real difficulties of liturgical renewal in a technological culture.

Some readers may disagree with one or another of Gaillardetz's responses to liturgical reform, such as his criticism of the proliferation of masses to accommodate overstressed schedules. After all, even while making space for alternatives, the church can't assume that all worshipers have the freedom to remake their lives at will.

Reformed, Anabaptist or Pentecostal thinkers emphasize different themes from Gaillardetz's, yet his articulation of both the problem and of the appropriate responses to it hold strong ecumenical significance. In his Catholic particularity, Gaillardetz exemplifies how we must now proceed. He models the kind of rooted, focused openness we must achieve in response to the technologies that would overtake us if they could. In a world where machines fill communion cups for effortless distribution and Web sites promise church without face-to-face interaction, the stakes may be higher than we think.