

ROBERT G. FERRELL



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There was a recent news item in my local paper, um, online news journal, about a young motorcyclist who ran off the road and was, tragically, killed. In his left hand the authorities found a smartphone, and theorized that he had been texting.

On a motorcycle, at highway speeds.

Texting.

If this were an isolated incident, a statistical freak, I could set it aside as just another sad and pointless traffic fatality. It is no such thing, however. The fact is that as the perimillennial children grow up, their pathological insistence on permanent attachment to the umbilical cord of connectivity is going to be the cause of more and more like catastrophes. I've tried hard not to be that old curmudgeon who sits in a rocking chair on the front porch and decries the upcoming generation and their unwholesome habits, but I'm finding it increasingly difficult as the always-connected disease progresses. Even I am wearing two cell phones as I write this.

Privacy issues aside, what will happen to the concept of "alone time" in the future? Are we heading for a "Borg"-type hive mind society? Will people who disconnect themselves be considered insane or social pariahs? Are you going to eat that last high-fiber bran muffin with currants? I like them slathered in artificially-flavored whipped margarine-like substance, myself.

I cherish my time totally unplugged from humanity: long walks on my property, driving with the radio off, or even simply sitting in my library with a book, swatting wasps that somehow got in under the eaves and can't find their way out. That's where I do my best thinking, if that verb can be said to apply to my often haphazard neural activity. I can't imagine how I would cope with the constant connectivity that seems to be imperative to a significant slice of today's youth, who at least are usually too preoccupied playing Words With Friends to mess around on my lawn. (Incidentally: OMG, LMAO, BBL, and BFF are not actually words.)

All right, that's enough old-guy whining. Let's move on to something else.

Somewhere deep in one of the human hippocampi (I've never been sure why I would be carrying around a pair of academic institutions for large water-loving mammals lodged in my limbic system, but neuroscientists insist and I'm too busy to argue) is a little-known nodule about the size of a guitar-picking blister on a "Dukes of Hazzard" action figure that controls our response to people who bring us bad news.

I don't know if it's a product of nature or nurture or both, but in far too many folks that li'l blister seems to be totally disconnected from the part of the brain that processes cause and effect. Maybe the axons got re-routed (or just withered away altogether) from too much "Wheel of Fortune" and "Family Feud" as a child, I don't know. What I do know is that if I walk into most institutions and find a serious flaw in their network security, the overwhelming tendency of management will be to blame me for the flaw itself—as though by observing it I somehow brought it into existence. While this might be a workable assertion in the quantum world, at the macro scale of Newtonian physics it is a load of festering armadillo kidneys.

This curious tendency to abandon basic principles of logic repeats itself on a regular basis throughout the connected world. I could write it off as a relatively harmless quirk of human psychology if the perpetrators of this logical inconsistency didn't often carry it to the next (also wholly illogical) step and prosecute the discoverer, whom they should rightfully be thanking. I've heard all the rationalizations for this action, including overstepping authority, releasing information so that the "bad guys" can make use of it, and a dozen others. I call horse hockey on all of them. Allow me to put this in simplified perspective for you.

I (hypothetically) live in a society where people have all of their private information encoded in little colored marbles. Whenever I open a bank account, register for a college class, have a medical procedure done—in short, engage in any of the usual activities that require positive identification and secure storage of personal data—I put a certified copy of this marble in a little box on the appropriate desk.

One day I'm in a college registrar's office, signing up for a continuing education class on Marble Assurance, when I notice that the registrar has left her desk to go to the bathroom. Curious about the security of my marble, which I have just witnessed her place in the box, I reach over and discover that although the box is properly locked, the lock is faulty and can easily be defeated by sliding the lid to one side. Within I see several dozen marbles, any of which I could easily abscond with and use to steal the

identity of the owner. I take only my own marble—my sovereign property—from the box and re-present it to the registrar upon her return, just to illustrate the security flaw. She notifies her chain of command about the breach.

That evening I warn some friends of mine on the social media site "MyFace" that they should be careful when entrusting their marbles to any institution that uses that particular model of box because the lock is easily circumvented. The next morning I am summarily arrested and charged under the tortuous Marble Fraud and Abuse Act in connection with the incident. I am forbidden to discuss the flaw and the MyFace post mysteriously disappears. I serve two years in prison and a further five years on probation for my heinous act.

Later in my now ruined life I run across one of those same Secure Marble Storage boxes for sale at an office supply store and purchase it with my salary from the corner convenience store, the only place that will hire a convicted felon. It is the latest and greatest version, brimming with new features and accompanied by a great deal of marketing hype, including glowing tributes from established Marble Security experts. I lock it securely and slide the lid to one side. The box falls open in my lap.

Moral: You can lead a crippled horse to slaughter, but that won't fix the hole he stumbled in.

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