

FINDING SPIRITUAL BALANCE IN A HYPERCONNECTED AGE
FINDING SPIRITUAL BALANCE IN A HYPERCONNECTED AGE



THE WIRED SOUL

FINDING SPIRITUAL BALANCE
IN A HYPERCONNECTED AGE

TRICIA MCCARY RHODES
TRICIA MCCARY RHODES
TRICIA MCCARY RHODES
TRICIA MCCARY RHODES
TRICIA MCCARY RHODES

Tricia Rhodes's *The Wired Soul* is a beautifully written book for digital immigrants, natives and second-generation net-surfers. She uses the four movements of *Lectio Divina* to invite the reader to unplug, slow down, single-task, and begin to override unhealthy behavioral habits, settling into a leisurely, transformative relationship with God.

GARY W. MOON

Executive director of the Martin Institute and Dallas Willard Center, Westmont College; author of *Apprenticeship with Jesus*

Technology is like a present: It can be either a gift or bait. Here is a book mature in wisdom and rich in interactive resources to help us discern what augmentations enhance life and what amputations drain away the blood and reduce the soul to stubs of ones and zeros.

LEONARD SWEET

Bestselling author (leonardsweet.com), professor (Drew University, George Fox University, Tabor College), and founder of preachthistory.com

Like so many others, I long for a more contemplative life. I know it's in my best interest. Yet my desire and my experience, born out of my choices, don't often seem to be on the friendliest of terms. Rhodes offers a practical (yes!), fascinating, and insightful set of explanations, encouragement, and tools. This is a *useful* book, very much worth digesting.

MARK OESTREICHER

Partner at The Youth Cartel, author of *A Parent's Guide to Understanding Teenage Brains*

The Wired Soul helped me identify the ways in which being chronically "connected" interferes with my connection to the One who matters most. Without condemnation, Rhodes's

personal observations, appeal to neurological research, and doable spiritual practices challenge and equip readers to reconnect, or connect for the first time, to our Source. Rhodes's prophetic analysis of the modern challenges we all face and her wise life-giving prescription are good gifts to the Church.

MARGOT STARBUCK

Author of *Not Who I Imagined*

Human beings are made in the image of a God who is spiritually balanced in a hyper-connected world. With a smartphone in one hand and the findings of cognitive neuroscience in the other, Tricia Rhodes helps the digitally distracted find their spiritual equilibrium again.

JOHN VAN SLOTEN

Author of *The Day Metallica Came to Church*

Thank you, Tricia, for lovingly inviting us to take the sugar-filled pacifier called technology out of our mouths before it completely rots our roots and destroys our ability to chew, savor, and swallow what our souls genuinely crave much more than the things that our extremely tech-saturated culture compels us to consume. Your masterful modernization of ancient spiritual practices will undoubtedly transform a digital revolution into a soulful renewal for all of your readers. Thanks for helping us fulfill our joyful destiny of an intimate walk with Jesus.

STEPHEN MACCHIA

Founder and president of Leadership Transformations, director of the Pierce Center at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, and author of *Becoming a Healthy Church*



TRICIA McCARY RHODES, PhD

NAVPRESS 

*A NavPress resource published in alliance
with Tyndale House Publishers, Inc.*



NavPress is the publishing ministry of The Navigators, an international Christian organization and leader in personal spiritual development. NavPress is committed to helping people grow spiritually and enjoy lives of meaning and hope through personal and group resources that are biblically rooted, culturally relevant, and highly practical.

For more information, visit www.NavPress.com.

The Wired Soul: Finding Spiritual Balance in a Hyperconnected Age

Copyright © 2016 by Tricia McCary Rhodes. All rights reserved.

A NavPress resource published in alliance with Tyndale House Publishers, Inc.

NAV PRESS and the NAV PRESS logo are registered trademarks of NavPress, The Navigators, Colorado Springs, CO. TYNDALE is a registered trademark of Tyndale House Publishers, Inc. Absence of ® in connection with marks of NavPress or other parties does not indicate an absence of registration of those marks.

Published in association with the literary agency of The Steve Laube Agency, LLC.

The Team:

Don Pape, Publisher; David Zimmerman, Acquiring Editor; Jen Phelps, Designer

Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are taken from *The Holy Bible*, English Standard Version® (ESV®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations marked HCSB are taken from the Holman Christian Standard Bible,® copyright © 1999, 2000, 2002, 2003, 2009 by Holman Bible Publishers. Used by permission. Holman Christian Standard Bible,® Holman CSB,® and HCSB® are federally registered trademarks of Holman Bible Publishers.

Scripture quotations marked MSG are taken from *THE MESSAGE* by Eugene H. Peterson, copyright © 1993, 1994, 1995, 1996, 2000, 2001, 2002. Used by permission of NavPress Publishing Group. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations marked NASB are taken from the New American Standard Bible,® copyright © 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1995 by The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission.

Scripture quotations marked NIV are taken from the Holy Bible, *New International Version*,® NIV.® Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.® Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.

Some of the anecdotal illustrations in this book are true to life and are included with the permission of the persons involved. All other illustrations are composites of real situations, and any resemblance to people living or dead is coincidental.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Rhodes, Tricia McCary, author.

Title: The wired soul : finding spiritual balance in a hyperconnected age / Tricia McCary Rhodes, PhD.

Description: Colorado Springs : NavPress, 2016. | Includes bibliographical references.

Identifiers: LCCN 2016015628 (print) | LCCN 2016016497 (ebook) | ISBN 9781631465123 | ISBN 9781631465154 (Apple) | ISBN 9781631465130 (E-Pub) | ISBN 9781631465147 (Kindle)

Subjects: LCSH: Spiritual life—Christianity.

Classification: LCC BV4501.3 .R463 2016 (print) | LCC BV4501.3 (ebook) | DDC 248—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2016015628>

Printed in the United States of America

22 21 20 19 18 17 16
7 6 5 4 3 2 1

CONTENTS

1. Wired Souls in a Digital World	1
PART ONE: LECTIO	
2. Slow Reading and Deep Thinking	17
PRACTICE: SLOW READING	35
3. Eat This Book	41
PRACTICE: RECEPTIVE READING	63
PRACTICE: RETENTIVE READING	67
PART TWO: MEDITATIO	
4. May I Have Your Attention, Please?	73
PRACTICE: GOD-FOCUSED DEEP BREATHING	87
5. Meditation—the Laboratory of the Soul	93
PRACTICE: BIBLICAL MEDITATION	109
PART THREE: ORATIO	
6. Praying the Texts of Our Digital Lives	119
PRACTICE: EXAMEN REGARDING CORRUPTED DESIRE	133
7. Alone . . . Together	139
PRACTICE: A BRIEF AND PRAYERFUL ASSESSMENT	157
PRACTICE: TABLE-TALK CONNECTIONS	161
PART FOUR: CONTEMPLATIO	
8. The Contemplative Life	167
PRACTICE: CONTEMPLATION IN SOLITUDE	187
PRACTICE: CONTEMPLATION IN ACTION	193
A Final Word	197
Acknowledgments	199
Notes	201

CHAPTER 01

WIRED SOULS IN A DIGITAL WORLD

THE MIDDAY SUN cast a golden glow across the meadow where I played with my brothers and sisters, our squeals and laughter peppering the air amidst a chorus of raucous birdsong. It was Saturday afternoon. My father, a nightshift oil refinery worker, had a rare day off, so we'd set out—seven of us packed like sardines into our two-door Ford Coupe—to waste time driving about the countryside. With no destination in mind, no schedule to keep, we just drove right out of our suburban neighborhood and kept going past the outskirts of town until my folks felt like stopping. When Dad pulled the car off the road, we sprinted off in different directions—some to climb trees, some to catch critters,

some to play hide-and-seek in the tall grasses, some to quietly explore foot-worn paths.

Those carefree escapades, some of my favorite childhood memories, seem like artifacts of another era. In a digital universe, unplugged spontaneity seems rarely sanctioned, if ever. It is sobering (to say the least) to consider that I am a part of a generation that has ushered in one of the most stunning paradigm shifts humanity has ever known.

I have lived in both worlds. My childhood days were untethered—no Internet, no smartphones, no persistent ping-ing of e-mails and texts, and no social media beyond our rotary dial phone. Television itself was a special event, served up sparingly and always fit for the entire family. My adult children, dubbed *digital natives*,¹ bridge the gap—I am the *before* and their children will be the *after*—the ones who will play out this saga of a change so capacious that we cannot find its edges, pulled along as we are by technology's relentless pace.

About 2,500 years ago a sage named Heraclitus offered the familiar maxim: The only thing that is constant is change. The aging Greek philosopher was alerting us that the only thing we can know with certainty will never change is that things are going to change. In hindsight, his wisdom seems understated, for surely in his wildest dreams Heraclitus could not have imagined the stunning rapidity with which the world to which you and I awaken each morning seems to be altering its course. As journalist Douglas Rushkoff suggests in his book *Present Shock*, "Change is no longer an event that happens, but a steady state of existence."²

The nagging sense that nothing about our lives is secure, that change is the new normal, is fueled by our ubiquitous presence online. Wherever we go and whatever we do, we are connected—from our cars to our bedrooms, from our desks to our coffee shops, from our churches to our kitchens. Amidst the ever-pinging text messages, the beeping backlog of e-mails, the plethora of posts, pokes, and pics on social media, as well as the expectation that we must be instantly available to everyone—friend or foe—who might contact us, we feel permanently tethered to our devices, as if they are some sort of technological umbilical cord connecting us to the universe.

I am not personally prone to panic attacks, but these days there are moments when I find myself out of sorts, almost as if I can't quite catch my breath. I don't think I'm alone in this. People of all ages seem terminally distracted, perpetually hurried, and often harried. It is rare for an answer to the question "how are you?" not to include the word *busy* and elicit some degree of angst. Collectively it feels as if we are losing something important in the name of progress, as if life itself is slipping through our fingers.

Yet if this is true, why do we not question the rhythms and patterns that govern our lives? What is it that makes us move mindlessly through our days, caught in the swift-moving current of a digital culture that waits for no one? Perhaps more importantly, what is all of this doing to the state of our souls? If the Spirit of God wanted to capture our undivided attention, what might he ever so gently whisper?

And could we hear him amidst the cacophony of cyber-static that surrounds us?

As someone who is passionate about spiritual formation, these questions have arrested my heart and mind. I have studied and read and prayed and pondered, and to be honest, it feels as if I've opened a Pandora's Box with contents worse than I expected. There's little question that dangers lurk in this digital sea in which we swim day in and day out, and while these have serious spiritual implications for Christ followers, the church seems largely silent on the issue. Instead, the voices of educators, neuroscientists, humanitarians, medical doctors, politicians, executives, psychologists, and social scientists alike resound in an increasingly loud chorus of caution concerning the long-term negative effects that technology may be having on culture and individuals, particularly those digital natives whose entire life experience has been one of a 24/7 connection.

My Love-Hate Relationship with Technology

Saturday night, circa 1959. Baths finished and pajamas donned, my four siblings and I were curled up on the living room floor watching hopefully while dad fiddled with the foil-wrapped rabbit ears that sat atop our small television. We were the first family on the block to get a color TV, an event that imbued us with almost-instant celebrity status in the neighborhood. There wasn't much content to choose from in those days, but if we were lucky and the weather cooperated,

Ben Cartwright and his boys would soon appear astride their horses as the *Bonanza* theme thundered its clip-clop tune and the credits emerged from the midst of a fire burning to the edges of the screen.

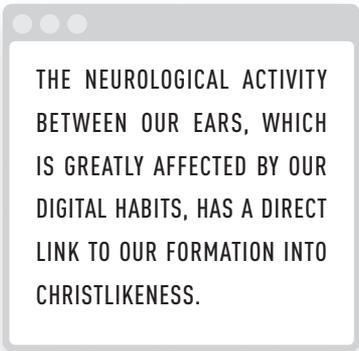
Fast-forward almost three decades to 1987. That particularly difficult winter, my vocal cords had been damaged from back-to-back throat infections, and the doctor forbade me to speak for a month. As a mother of two boys, this was an excruciating dilemma—until a good friend hauled over their Apple II computer. Now I could communicate by typing on a keyboard and watching my words magically appear on the screen. We were all in awe. Never mind that the computer was a cumbersome eyesore, taking up half of my kitchen table, where I had to remain in case I needed to talk to my family members—who, I might add, were far more enamored of that technological wonder than sympathetic to my plight.

These stories date me as a *digital immigrant*. I share them because they frame my perspective in writing this book. I have watched the ushering in of the technological revolution firsthand, and if I sound unduly alarmist at times, this is probably why. But truth be told, I love technology and can as easily become fixated on the next best thing as anyone else. I work from a computer with two monitors, and I have a two-in-one for travel, an Internet media center, an e-reader, and a smartphone. I use many of them continually, even in my morning devotionals, where a variety of apps enhances my spiritual quests. I am keenly aware not only that our hyperconnectivity is not going away but that the future will

be increasingly difficult to navigate without a hefty level of technological acumen. Be assured, then, that this book is not a plea to return to the past, nor will it champion an unplugged life.

Yet, at the same time, I am disturbed at the spiritual losses that seem to be piling up, not only for individuals and families, but for the church at large, as a result of our wholesale and uninformed immersion into this digital universe. God has imbued our souls with certain capacities that are essential for knowing him and making his presence known in the world—things like reflection and meditation, communion and compassion, contemplation and listening, awareness and even prayerfulness. These and others are at risk, in part because of the frenetic nature of our lives, but more importantly

because of the impact technology is having on our brains. Simply put, the neurological activity between our ears, which is greatly affected by our digital habits, has a direct link to our formation into Christlikeness. I believe the time has come for us to grapple seriously with this.



THE NEUROLOGICAL ACTIVITY BETWEEN OUR EARS, WHICH IS GREATLY AFFECTED BY OUR DIGITAL HABITS, HAS A DIRECT LINK TO OUR FORMATION INTO CHRISTLIKENESS.

An Honest Assessment

Are there moments when you sense that your life is out of balance, that somewhere along the line you've lost control

of how you manage your time and energy? Let me ask this another way: Can you say with confidence that technology is a servant to your needs rather than a silent taskmaster over you? Perhaps you've not really thought about it, but consider this: Do you ever

- go online to read or watch something or check social media, and end up spending an hour or more lost in hyperlinks, while feeling like you have nothing to show for it?
- feel compelled to check immediately when you hear a ping for a text, e-mail, or phone call, regardless of who you are with or what you are doing?
- sit down to read a book and find yourself impossibly distracted, or realize after five or ten minutes that you can't remember a thing you've just read?
- set aside a time for quiet prayer but feel so antsy you can't get anything out of it?
- ignore the people who are right there with you as you play games online or engage in social media?
- find yourself waking up in the morning already on overload, feeling as if you will never tie up all the loose ends in your life?

If you found yourself answering yes—as most probably would—you are living out some of the negative consequences of a hyperconnected life. But here's the thing: Have you ever taken the time or invested the energy to consider what impact

this is having on your walk with God? Do you ever honestly assess how your engagement with technology may be forming (or malforming) you as a spiritual being? My desire is that this book will challenge you to do just that. But at the same time, and equally importantly, I want to show you that there is a way out—that you do not have to be an unwitting victim of digitization. The truth is that God has given us all we need to recapture the capacities we need for our souls' well-being and to bring spiritual balance to our lives.

How? Surprisingly, the answers begin with the exploding study of the human brain called neuroscience, which has not only discovered the ways that technology may be reshaping our brains, but also offers great hope for turning things around.

This Is Your Brain on Technology

When I was in third grade, Miss Small—a stout, gray-haired, no-nonsense Sunday school teacher who showed up every week in the same charcoal suit and white silk blouse—stunned our entire class by cracking a raw egg into a glass of beer, soberly warning us that the egg represented our brains.

The lesson itself, if there was one to be had, was lost on us. We squirmed and snickered in awkward awe at that can of Pabst Blue Ribbon sitting there on a Sunday morning in our Southern Baptist church. Truth be told, there wasn't an eight-year-old among us who had ever been in such close proximity to a can of beer, much less breathed in its yeasty aroma as it bubbled and frothed its way to the top of the glass.

Turns out Alice Small may have been ahead of her time, at least in likening a brain to an egg. In the mid-1980s the Partnership for a Drug-Free America launched an ad campaign with a close-up video of an egg dropping into a frying pan, while a voice in the background uttered the well-known phrase “This is your brain on drugs. Any questions?”

Aside from the fact that the texture of a brain is more like a bowl of Jell-O than the contents of an eggshell, these examples rightfully allude to a more recent, astounding scientific discovery: Our brains have the property of *plasticity*. This means that rather than being hardwired in the womb, as was once assumed, our brains are always changing, even into adulthood, making constant adjustments over the course of our lives based on our everyday actions and experiences.

Here’s a brief overview of how this works. Incredibly, your brain hosts 100 billion neurons (nerve cells), roughly as many as the number of stars in the Milky Way. Any single one of these neurons can have up to ten thousand thread-like branches, which continually send or receive signals from other neurons—a bit like friends talking on the telephone. Between these branches are minuscule spaces called synapses, which is where these signals—your thoughts, perceptions, and memories—shuttle along like race cars at speeds of up to 250 miles per hour. When you go to sleep at night, this activity continues as your brain sets about the task of pruning. Neurons grow new branches and lose old ones, and neural pathways may be strengthened, shrunk,

created, or destroyed based on what you did during your waking hours.

All of this relates to an important principle regarding the brain's plasticity, reflected in the increasingly popular phrase "Cells that fire together, wire together." In short, the more you engage in any one thought process or behavior, the more regularly specific brain cells fire together, and thus the more deeply entrenched those supportive neural pathways become.³ This is how you establish habits and form mental models that end up determining, in large part, your way of being in this world.

What are the spiritual implications of this? Our ever-increasing engagement with technology is deepening neural pathways that make it difficult to maintain practices that are essential for soul care. For example:

- Our habit of continually switching from one thing to another on our devices trains our brains to seek constant stimulation, and this makes it hard to spend focused time connecting with God.
- The way we skim when we are on the Internet trains our brains for shallow thinking, so we struggle to take in transcendent truths that reveal the profound beauty of Christ.
- Compulsive texting, playing video games, and engaging in social media train our brains to neglect the person in front of us, robbing us of the awareness we need to be salt and light or to love our neighbors as ourselves.

These are just a few of the ways that our hyperconnected lives may be imperiling our walk with God.

Finding Our Way Out

I hope you can see here that the stakes are too high for us to ignore. Yet because our brains have this marvelous capacity to adapt, we have hope: We really can take control of technology and make it work to our advantage. In fact, if you were to peruse a score of the latest books on technology and the brain, you would discover recommendations for a number of activities that promise to do just that.

Most of these recommendations are based on secular research. Studies indicate, for example, that *reflection* contributes to a well-rounded mind and an ability to “thrive in a complex, ever-shifting new world.” *Meditation* strengthens your brain and is a “stepping stone to becoming more compassionate, calm, and joyful.” *Prayer* can lower your propensity to anger and increase empathy. *Contemplation* can actually cause your brain to grow.⁴

It is a stunning fact that these practices and others were all laid out in Scripture thousands of years ago. In this book, I offer fresh ways to engage with many of these ancient spiritual practices. They can help you become a better steward of your digital life as you rewire your brain. To that end, we will explore four categories of our spiritual journeys, each one symbolized by a component from a discipline called *lectio divina* (“sacred reading”), which I use as a metaphor to frame

the conversation.⁵ Here is a short synopsis of what you can expect:

- *Lectio*—to read. This section will examine why we struggle with focus and how our waning capacity to do so is affecting our ability to think deeply. It includes simple practices such as deep reading and memory enhancement that can help us regain clarity and improve our ability to concentrate.
- *Meditatio*—to meditate. This section looks at the various ways technology breeds distraction and, as a result, a shallow spirituality. It includes practices such as God-focused deep breathing and biblical meditation, designed to settle our minds and hearts and to enable us to deepen our grasp of God's ways, works, and Word.
- *Oratio*—to pray. Here I explore how we have unwittingly yielded control over our thoughts and behavior to others, as well as the deficits we face relationally as a result of digital idolatry. This section includes practices designed to restore personal balance and foster authentic community through greater consecration.
- *Contemplatio*—to contemplate. This section considers how we lack awareness of God and his heart, both in times alone and as we move about in the world, because of the pace we feel pressured to maintain. It includes practices that foster a vision of God's love that both infuses us and informs our way of being in the world.⁶

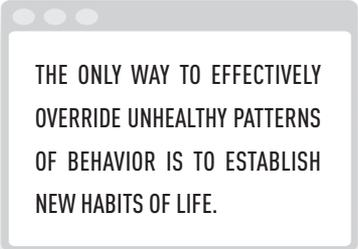
A Final Caution

I read recently that the amount of time we spend online, whether via computers, tablets, or smartphones, is becoming so hazardous that we will one day look back with attitudes much like those reflected today toward smoking—distress at the price we have paid, indignation that no one warned us of its perils. At the risk of overstatement, I have to say that this is the reality that troubles me day and night and has driven me to write this book. I am convinced that if we don't wrestle with these issues now, we risk forfeiting our destinies and those of generations to come to the tyranny of technological urgency.

Yet, as much as I'd love for scores of people to read this book, I must caution you that reading alone will bring no lasting change to your spiritual life. If I've learned anything from my own journey and the variety of sources

I've consulted as I've written this book, it is that transformation comes not through what we know but through what we do with it—or, in other words, through the practices we keep. The only way to effectively override unhealthy patterns of behavior is to establish new habits of life.

To that end, I pray fervently that you will take the practices in each chapter seriously enough to engage in them with determination and diligence. If you do, I believe you will be



THE ONLY WAY TO EFFECTIVELY
OVERRIDE UNHEALTHY PATTERNS
OF BEHAVIOR IS TO ESTABLISH
NEW HABITS OF LIFE.

refreshed and invigorated as your brain is rewired, and you will find the balance you need to live in this hyperconnected world. Over time, your spiritual journey will deepen as your life is transformed for the glory of our Lord and the joy of your own heart.