

Featured story:

EATING CHOCOLATE

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With the coming of Christmas the frequency of commercials depicting colognes, cars & smart phones increases. Will you be buying your loved one a box of chocolates or a new smart phone this holiday season?

When I walk about in the city, when I take some sort of public transport, when I am in some kind of waiting room or reception area, I look about me. One of the most salient features that they all have in common is the familiar sight of people with their heads crooked in a downward position. Following their intent gaze leads you to a brightly lit object occupying a big part of their open palms. Yes, the cell phone.

At the time of this writing I was looking at some old videos taken some ten years back. People looked more or less the same, clothes and hair styles not much different than today. What really stood out was that everybody was recording the events with cameras! Digital cameras, but not a simple embedded lens conveniently located in their mobile phone. In a few short years almost all those people with the latest versions of digital cameras would forsake them wholeheartedly in favour of those expensive slim rectangular smart phones. Within those few short years those phones will have become so familiar an item that no-one will question their ever presence in our daily lives. In fact, questions will arise when a rare individual is discovered to be without.

They are so commonplace nowadays that one nearby city has taken the initiative to advise pedestrians on the sidewalks that they are coming to the end of the block by painting 'stop sign ahead' on the ground. Apparently people have been so engrossed in what the screen before them has to offer that a number of them have walked right into the intersection. Hopefully those reminders by their feet will be sufficient to enter their field of vision to indeed stop walking at the street corners. I suppose one day soon all smart phones will be equipped with an app which will set off increasingly intense flashing lights and noises to prevent further incidents, maybe even advising drivers about to enter the intersection that one pedestrian is not heeding the warnings, or stronger yet, the phone of the distracted pedestrian would shut itself off momentarily. Perhaps a few years later wayward pedestrians may even automatically activate some braking system in the oncoming car, thereby eliminating the need to advise those deeply captivated viewers so they needn't be distracted with those cumbersome inconveniences of early alarms. Such is evolution and progress.

And such is the force of influencing the masses. We, each and every one of us, have our own individual thoughts and ways of doing things. There are people similar to us in some ways, but never exactly. And many of those similarities are instrumental in linking us with others. It's that 'connectedness' which is so fast defining our current group behaviour and individual tastes. We want to be special and recognized for who we are yet still belong and be accepted.

And this brings us to the chocolate.

Around the time when my son was taking his first steps and starting to say in words that which could be communicated, people wanted to introduce him to the wonderful world of chocolate. They would stuff it into his mouth, waiting for his appreciative and pleasantly surprised reaction. They would give it to him as a special treat, associating it with the marvelous moment of meeting up with those same people and perhaps the event itself, like someone's birthday. The thing is, he really didn't like chocolate. He was open to new and happy things, especially things that could be placed in the mouth and taste good. But for some reason, chocolate was something he did not want.

And nobody could appreciate that. They already knew from past experience that despite all the enthusiasm surrounding the presentation of chocolate, he would invariably remove it from his mouth, one way or another. Yet

still they tried, even insisted. It wasn't from any bad intentions from the point of view of the givers. They simply wanted to share what they liked and found normal, and to introduce / welcome him to that world.

It was astounding to see just how much and how frequently people pushed chocolate onto him. I wouldn't have probably noticed it, taking it so much for granted being an avid chocolate lover myself, had it not been for the reactions of my son. My wife and I tried to explain the situation to others. Some listened, some did not.

It was confusing for my son. People he knew and trusted all thought chocolate was good. People he didn't know offered him that treat. It was always packaged as something special, something he should enjoy. And what a surprise that he didn't. When he went to a birthday party, all the kids around him greedily dug into the chocolate birthday cake. For a few good years he went with his initial instinct to not indulge in chocolate.

It wasn't a social statement or a stand he was taking. He was simply following his nature, what he desired and what he didn't. In the end, though, the social pressures were too much and he eventually gave in. He wanted to be like everyone else, to enjoy what they took pleasure in. And so he did.

It's not a big deal, really. It's only chocolate, right? So as an interested onlooker, I went along with this change, letting him decide for himself if he wanted to join the others in their occasional partaking of chocolate. But part of me was a little sad. Again, I don't think any harm was done, but it's impressive just how much can be built up around a seemingly innocent object or action.

And this brings me back to the cell phones. Like my son and his initial lack of interest in chocolate, I never really got the bug to get a mobile phone. I had no real personal or political reason for not getting one. I simply didn't feel the attraction. I listened with interest as my friends expounded their virtues or showed the latest features their new model exuberated. I even liked and occasionally was amazed at what the new technology was capable of. But it wasn't enough for me to go and get one myself. And so it went.

Cell phones became smart phones. Apps were free (although you signed over quite a lot in exchange), and more and more it became obligatory. The world was growing up around them and what they could do. And now many doors are closing because there are things you cannot do without one. In some places there are a few options that still linger on for those without cell phones, but they are fast disappearing.

I don't think the world was deliberately created to exclude non-practioners, although I do think, unlike chocolate, that there are some groups of people who do conspire to exploit smart phones in a way that your life would be made incredibly difficult if you don't fit into their way of things.

The so-called 'free' apps have been taking over and squeezing out other options that easily worked before. Soon it will not be possible to take a bus, make an appointment, access your bank account or even enter some buildings without a mobile phone & all its tracking and profiling elements constantly at work.

I'm not against people having smart phones and can see the advantages which those who are attracted to them confidently point out. But for the life of me I don't understand the blind determined rush to accept everything those devices have to offer, good & bad. It's not that I set out to be a radical or someone different. It's just that by not joining the others, I am increasingly being placed in that position.

So I wonder, how soon it will be before I join my son in 'liking chocolate'.

AFTERWORD:

There are some things that truly resist being resisted. It's sometimes hard to put a finger on it. Maybe it seems you are or are made to feel alone in seeing things in such a way. Perhaps the world has grown up both deliberately and naturally to encourage some ideas and discourage others. I wonder sometimes that the world we are growing into will be much more intolerant of changes and differences, at least to the currently prescribed ways of doing things. I wonder even more how we will deal with those impositions packaged in a favourable way, in our interactions, and at a personal level.