

Albert Borgmann

Technology and the Character of Contemporary Life

Albert Borgmann here contrasts the technological world of convenience with the traditional world of what he calls "focal" things and practices which connect us with our surrounding world and call forth an integral identity. Religion, which literally means "re-connection" is a paradigm for such focal practices. Albert Borgmann teaches philosophy of technology and religion at the University of Montana in Missoula.

Focal things and practices

To see that the force of nature can be encountered analogously in many other places, we must develop the general notions of focal things and practices. This is the first point of this chapter. The Latin word *focus*, its meaning and etymology, are our best guides to this task. But once we have learned tentatively to recognize the instances of focal things and practices in our midst; we must acknowledge their scattered and inconspicuous character too. Their hidden splendor comes to light when we consider Heidegger's reflections on simple and eminent things. But an inappropriate nostalgia clings to Heidegger's account. It can be dispelled, so I will argue, when we remember and realize more fully that the technological environment heightens rather than denies the radiance of genuine focal things and when we learn to understand that focal things require a practice to prosper within. These points I will try to give substance in the subsequent parts of this chapter by calling attention to the focal concerns of running and of the culture of the table.

The Latin word *focus* means hearth. We came upon it in Chapter 9 where the device paradigm was first delineated and where the hearth or fireplace; a thing, was seen as the counterpart to the central heating plant, a device. It was pointed out that in a pre-technological house the fireplace constituted a center of warmth, of light, and of daily practices. For the Romans the *focus* was holy, the place where the house gods resided. In ancient Greece, a baby was truly joined to the family and household when it was carried about the hearth and placed before it. The union of a Roman marriage was sanctified at the hearth. And at least in the early periods the dead were buried by the hearth. The family ate by the hearth and made sacrifices to the house gods before and after the meal. The hearth sustained, ordered, and centered house and family. Reflections of the hearth's significance can yet be seen in the fireplace of many American homes. The fireplace often has a central location in the house. Its fire is now symbolical since it rarely furnishes sufficient warmth. But the radiance, the sounds, and the fragrance of living fire consuming logs that are split, stacked, and felt in their grain have retained their force. There are no longer images of the ancestral gods placed by the fire; but there often are pictures of loved ones on or above the mantel, precious things of the family's history, or a clock, measuring time.

The symbolical center of the house, the living room with the fireplace, often seems forbidding in comparison with the real center, the kitchen with its inviting smells and sounds. Accordingly, the architect Jeremiah Eck has rearranged homes to give them back a hearth, "a place of warmth and activity" that encompasses cooking, eating, and living and so is central to the house whether it literally has a fireplace or not.¹ Thus we can satisfy, he says, "the need for a place of focus in our family lives."

"Focus," in English, is now a technical term of geometry and optics. Johannes Kepler was the first so to use it, and he probably drew on the then already current sense of focus as the "burning point of lens or mirror." Correspondingly, an optic or geometric focus is a point where lines or rays converge or from which they diverge in a regular or lawful way. Hence "focus" is used as a verb in optics to denote moving an object in relation to a lens or modifying a combination of lenses in relation to an object so that a clear and well-defined image is produced.

These technical senses of "focus" have happily converged with the original one in ordinary language. Figuratively they suggest that a focus gathers the relations of its context and radiates into its surroundings and informs them. To

¹Jeremiah Eck, AHome is Where the Hearth is,@ *Quest* 3 (April 1979).

focus on something or to bring it into focus is to make it central, clear, and articulate. It is in the context of these historical and living senses of "focus" that I want to speak of focal things and practices. Wilderness on this continent, it now appears, is a focal thing. It provides a center of orientation; when we bring the surrounding technology into it, our relations to technology become clarified and well-defined. But just how strong its gathering and radiating force is requires further reflection. And surely there will be other focal things and practices: music, gardening, the culture of the table, or running.

We might in a tentative way be able to see these things as focal; what we see more clearly and readily is how inconspicuous, homely and dispersed they are. This is in stark contrast to the focal things of pre-technological times, the Greek temple or the medieval cathedral that we have mentioned before. Martin Heidegger was deeply impressed by the orienting force of the Greek temple. For him, the temple not only gave a center of meaning to its world but had orienting power in the strong sense of first originating or establishing the world, of disclosing the world's essential dimensions and criteria. Whether the thesis so extremely put is defensible or not, the Greek temple was certainly more than a self-sufficient architectural sculpture, more than a jewel of well-articulated and harmoniously balanced elements, more, even, than a shrine for the image of the goddess or the god. As Vincent Scully has shown, a temple or a temple precinct gathered and disclosed the land in which they were situated. The divinity of land and sea was focused in the temple.²

To see the work of art as the focus and origin of the world's meaning was a pivotal discovery for Heidegger. He had begun in the modern tradition of Western philosophy where, as suggested in the first chapter of this book, the sense of reality is to be grasped by determining the antecedent and controlling conditions of all there is (the *Bedingungen der Möglichkeit* as Immanuel Kant has it). Heidegger wanted to outdo this tradition in the radicality of his search for the fundamental conditions of being. Perhaps it was the restlessness of his pursuit that disclosed the ultimate futility of it. At any rate, when the universal conditions are explicated in a suitably general and encompassing way, what truly matters still hangs in the balance because everything depends on how the conditions come to be actualized and instantiated. The preoccupation with antecedent conditions not only leaves this question unanswered; it may even make it inaccessible by leaving the impression that, once the general and fundamental matters are determined, nothing of

²See Vincent Scully, *The Earth, the Temple and the Gods* (New Haven, 1962).

consequence remains to be considered. Heidegger's early work, however, already contained the seeds of its overcoming. In his determination to grasp reality in its concreteness, Heidegger had found and stressed the inexorable and unsurpassable givenness of human existence, and he had provided analyses of its pre-technological wholeness and its technological distraction though the significance of these descriptions, for technology had remained concealed to him. And then he discovered that the unique event of significance in the singular work of art, in the prophet's proclamation, and in the political deed was crucial. This insight was worked out in detail with regard to the artwork. But in an epilogue to the essay that develops this point, Heidegger recognized that the insight comes too late. To be sure, our time has brought forth admirable works of art. "But," Heidegger insists, "the question remains: is art still an essential and necessary way in which that truth happens which is decisive for historical existence, or is art no longer of this character?@

Heidegger began to see technology (in his more or less substantive sense) as the force that has eclipsed the focusing powers of pre-technological times. Technology becomes for him...the final phase of a long metaphysical development. The philosophical concern with the conditions of the possibility of whatever is now, itself seen as a move into the oblivion of what finally matters. But how are we to recover orientation in the oblivious and distracted era of technology when the great embodiments of meaning, the works of art, have lost their focusing power? Amidst the complication of conditions, of the *Bedingungen*, we must uncover the simplicity of things, of the *Dinge*. A jug, an earthen vessel from which we pour wine, is such a thing. It teaches us what it is to hold, to offer, to pour, and to give. In its clay, it gathers for us the earth as it does in containing the wine that has grown from the soil. It gathers the sky whose rain and sun are present in the wine. It refreshes and animates us in our mortality. And in the libation it acknowledges and calls on the divinities. In these ways the thing (in agreement with its etymologically original meaning) gathers and discloses what Heidegger calls the fourfold, the interplay of the crucial dimensions of earth and sky, mortals and divinities. A thing, in Heidegger's eminent sense, is a focus; to speak of focal things is to emphasize the central point twice.

Still, Heidegger's account is but a suggestion fraught with difficulties. When Heidegger described the focusing power of the jug, he might have been thinking of a rural setting where wine jugs embody in their material, form, and craft a long and local tradition; where at noon one goes down to the cellar to draw a jug of table wine whose vintage one knows well; where at the noon meal the wine is thoughtfully poured and gratefully received. Under such circumstances, there

might be a gathering and disclosure of the fourfold, one that is for the most part understood and in the background and may come to the fore on festive occasions. But all of this seems as remote to most of us and as muted in its focusing power as the Parthenon or the Cathedral of Chartres. How can so simple a thing as a jug provide that turning point in our relation to technology to which Heidegger is looking forward?

Heidegger's proposal for a reform of technology is even more programmatic and terse than his analysis of technology. Both, however, are capable of fruitful development. Two points in Heidegger's consideration of the turn of technology must particularly be noted. The first serves to remind us of arguments already developed which must be kept in mind if we are to make room for focal things and practices. Heidegger says, broadly paraphrased, that the orienting force of simple things will come to the fore only as the rule of technology is raised from its anonymity, is disclosed as the orthodoxy that heretofore has been taken for granted and allowed to remain invisible. As long as we overlook the tightly patterned character of technology and believe that we live in a world of endlessly open and rich opportunities, as long as we ignore the definite ways in which we, acting technologically, have worked out the promise of technology and remain vaguely enthralled by that promise, so long simple things and practices will seem burdensome, confining, and drab. But if we recognize the central vacuity of advanced technology, that emptiness can become the opening for focal things. It works both ways, of course. When we see a focal concern of ours threatened by technology, our sight for the liabilities of mature technology is sharpened.

A second point of Heidegger's is one that we must develop now. The things that gather the fourfold, Heidegger says, are inconspicuous and humble. And when we look at his litany of things, we also see that they are scattered and of yesterday: jug and bench, footbridge and plow, tree and pond, brook and hill, heron and deer, horse and bull, mirror and clasp, book and picture, crown and cross. That focal things and practices are inconspicuous is certainly true; they flourish at the margins of public attention. And they have suffered a diaspora; this too must be accepted, at least for now. That is not to say that a hidden center of these dispersed focuses may not emerge some day to unite them and bring them home. But it would clearly be a forced growth to proclaim such a unity now. A reform of technology that issues from focal concerns will be radical not in imposing a new and unified master plan on the technological universe but in discovering those sources of strength that will nourish principled and confident beginnings, measures, i.e., which will neither rival nor deny technology. But there are two ways in which we must go beyond Heidegger. One step in the first direction has already been taken. It led us

to see...that the simple things of yesterday attain a new splendor in today's technological context. The suggestion in Heidegger's reflections that we have to seek out pre-technological enclaves to encounter focal things is misleading and dispiriting. Rather we must see any such enclave itself as a focal thing heightened by its technological context. The turn to things cannot be a setting aside and even less an escape from technology but a kind of affirmation of it. The second move beyond Heidegger is in the direction of practice, into the social and, later, the political situation of focal things. Though Heidegger assigns humans their place in the fourfold when he depicts the jug in which the fourfold is focused, we scarcely see the hand that holds the jug, and far less do we see of the social setting in which the pouring of the wine comes to pass. In his consideration of another thing, a bridge, Heidegger notes the human ways and works that are gathered and directed by the bridge. But these remarks too present practices from the viewpoint of the focal thing. What must be shown is that focal things can prosper in human practices only. Before we can build a bridge, Heidegger suggests, we must be able to dwell. But what does that mean concretely?

The consideration of the wilderness has disclosed a center that stands in fruitful counter-position to technology. The wilderness is beyond the procurement of technology, and our response to it takes us past consumption. But it also teaches us to accept and to appropriate technology. We must now try to discover if such centers of orientation can be found in greater proximity and intimacy to the technological everyday life. And I believe they can be found if we follow up the hints that we have gathered from and against Heidegger; the suggestions that focal things seem humble and scattered but attain splendor in technology if we grasp technology properly, and that focal things require a practice for their welfare.

Running and the culture of the table are such focal things and practices. We have all been touched by them in one way or another., If we have not participated in a vigorous or competitive run, we have certainly taken walks; we have felt with surprise, perhaps, the pleasure of touching the earth, of feeling the wind, smelling the rain, of having the blood course through our bodies more steadily. In the preparation of a meal we have enjoyed the simple tasks of washing leaves and cutting bread; we have felt the force and generosity of being served a good wine and homemade bread. Such experiences have been particularly vivid when we came upon them after much sitting and watching indoors, after a surfeit of readily available snacks and drinks. To encounter a few simple things was liberating and invigorating. The normal clutter and distraction fall away when, as the poet says,

there, in limpid brightness shine,

on the table, bread and wine.³

³Georg Trakl, quoted by Heidegger in *Language* in *Poetry, Language, Thought* 194-5. (Borgmann acknowledges he has taken some liberties with Hofstadter's translation.)

If such experiences are deeply touching, they are fleeting as well. There seems to be no thought or discourse that would shelter and nurture such events; not in politics certainly, nor in philosophy where the prevailing idiom sanctions and applies equally to lounging and walking, to Twinkies, and to bread, the staff of life. But the reflective care of the good life has not withered away. It has left the profession of philosophy and sprung up among practical people. In fact, there is a tradition in this country of persons who are engaged by life in its concreteness and simplicity and who are so filled with this engagement that they have reached for the pen to become witnesses and teachers, speakers of deictic discourse. Melville and Thoreau are among the great prophets of this tradition. Its present health and extent are evident from the fact that it now has no overpowering heroes but many and various more or less eminent practitioners. Their work embraces a spectrum between down-to-earth instruction and soaring speculation. The span and center of their concerns vary greatly. But they all have their mooring in the attention to tangible and bodily things and practices, and they speak with an enthusiasm that is nourished by these focal concerns. Pirsig's book⁴ is an impressive and troubling monument in this tradition, impressive in the freshness of its observations and its pedagogical skill, troubling in its ambitious and failing efforts to deal with the large philosophical issues. Norman Maclean's *A River Runs through It* can be taken as a fly-fishing-manual, a virtue that pleases its author.⁵ But it is a literary work of art most of all and a reflection on technology inasmuch as it presents the engaging life, both dark and bright, from which we have so recently emerged. Colin Fletcher's treatise of *The Complete Walker* is most narrowly a book of instruction about hiking and backpacking. The focal significance of these things is found in the interstices of equipment and technique; and when the author explicitly engages in deictic discourse he has "an unholy awful time" with it. Roger B. Swain's contemplation of gardening in *Earthly Pleasures* enlightens us in cool and graceful prose about the scientific basis and background of what we witness and undertake in our gardens. Philosophical significance enters unbidden and easily in the reflections on time, purposiveness, and the familiar. Looking at these books, I see a stretch of water that extends beyond my vision, disappearing in the distance. But I can see that it is a strong and steady stream, and it may well have parts that are more magnificent than the ones I know.

⁴*Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*. Pirsig also taught philosophy at the University of Montana.

⁵A memoir of the author's youth, also lived in Western Montana.

To discover more clearly the currents and features of this, the other and more concealed, American mainstream, I take as witnesses two books where enthusiasm suffuses instruction vigorously, Robert Farrar Capon's *The Supper of the Lamb* and George Sheehan's *Running and Being*. Both are centered on focal events, the great run and the great meal. The great run, where one exults in the strength of one's body, in the ease and the length of the stride, where nature speaks powerfully in the hills, the wind, the heat, where one takes endurance to the breaking point, and where one is finally engulfed by the good will of the spectators and the fellow runners. The great meal, the long session as Capon calls it, where the guests are thoughtfully invited, the table has been carefully set, where the food is the culmination of tradition, patience, and skill and the presence of the earth's most delectable textures where there is an invocation of divinity at the beginning and memorable conversation throughout.

Such focal events are compact, and if seen only in their immediate temporal and spatial extent they are easily mistaken. They are more mistakable still when they are thought of as experiences in the subjective sense, events that have their real meaning in transporting a person into a certain mental or emotional state. Focal events, so conceived, fall under the rule of technology. For when a subjective state becomes decisive, the search for a machinery that is functionally equivalent to the traditional enactment of that state begins, and it is spurred by endeavors to find machineries that will procure the state more instantaneously, ubiquitously, more assuredly and easily. If, on the other hand, we guard focal things in their depth and integrity, then, to see them fully and truly, we must see them in context. Things that are deprived of their context become ambiguous.° The letter "a" by itself means nothing in particular. In the context of "table" it conveys or helps to convey a more definite meaning. But "table" in turn can mean many things. It means something more powerful in the text of Capon's book where he speaks of "The Vesting of the Table." But that text must finally be seen in the context and texture of the world. To say that something becomes ambiguous is to say that it is made to say less, little, or nothing. Thus to elaborate the context of focal events is to grant them their proper eloquence.

AThe distance runner," Sheehan says, "is the least of all athletes. His sport the least of all sports." Running is simply to move through time and space, step-by-step. But there is splendor in that simplicity. In a car we move of course much faster, farther, and more comfortably-But we are not moving on our own power and in our own right. We cash in prior labor for present motion. Being beneficiaries of science and engineering and having worked to be able to pay for a car, gasoline, and road, we now release what has been earned and stored and use it

for transportation. But when these past efforts are consumed and consummated in my driving, I can at best take credit for what I have done. What I am doing now, driving, requires no effort, and little or no skill or discipline. I am a divided person; my achievement lies in the past, my enjoyment in the present. But in the runner, effort and joy are one; the split between means and ends, labor and leisure is healed." To be sure, if I have trained conscientiously, my past efforts will bear fruit in a race. But they are not just cashed in. My strength must be risked and enacted in the race which is itself a supreme effort and an occasion to expand my skill.

This unity of achievement and enjoyment, of competence and consummation, is just one aspect of a central wholeness to which running restores us. Good running engages mind and body. Here the mind is more than an intelligence that happens to be housed in a body. Rather the mind is the sensitivity and the endurance of the body. Hence running in its fullness, as Sheehan stresses over and over again, is in principle different from exercise designed to procure physical health. The difference between running and physical exercise is strikingly exhibited in one and the same issue of the *New York Times Magazine*. It contains an account by Peter Wood of how, running the New York City Marathon, he took in the city with body and mind, and it has an account by Alexandra Penney of corporate fitness programs where executives, concerned about their Coronary Risk Factor Profile, run nowhere on treadmills or ride stationary bicycles. In another issue, the *Magazine* shows executives exercising their bodies while busying their dissociated minds with reading. To be sure, unless a runner concentrates on bodily performance, often in an effort to run the best possible race, the mind wanders as the body runs. But as in free association we range about the future and the past, the actual and the possible, our mind, like our breathing, rhythmically gathers itself to the here and now, having spread itself to distant times and faraway places.

It is clear from these reflections that the runner is mindful of the body because the body is intimate with the world. The mind becomes relatively disembodied when the body is severed from the depth of the world, i.e., when the world is split into commodious surfaces and inaccessible machineries. Thus the unity of ends and means, of mind and body, and of body and world is one and the same. It makes itself felt in the vividness with which the runner experiences reality. "Somehow you feel more in touch," Wood says, "with the realities of a massive inner-city housing problem when you are running through it slowly enough to take in the grim details, and, surprisingly, cheered on by the remaining occupants." As this last remark suggests, the wholeness that running establishes embraces the human family too. The experience of that simple event releases an equally simple and profound sympathy. It is a natural goodwill, not in need of drugs nor

dependent on a common enemy. It wells up from depths that have been forgotten, and it overwhelms the runners ever and again. As Wood recounts his running through streets normally besieged by crime and violence, he remarks: "But we can only be amazed today at the warmth that emanates from streets usually better known for violent crime." And his response to the spectators' enthusiasm is this: "I feel a great proximity to the crowd, rushing past at all of nine miles per hour; a great affection for them individually; a commitment to run as well as I possibly can, to acknowledge their support."

For George Sheehan, finally, running discloses the divine. When he runs, he wrestles with God. Serious running takes us to the limits of our being. We run into threatening and seemingly unbearable pain. Sometimes, of course, the plunge into that experience gets arrested in ambition and vanity. But it can take us further to the point where in suffering our limits we experience our greatness too. This, surely, is a hopeful place to escape technology, metaphysics, and the God of the philosophers and reach out to the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

If running allows us to center our lives by taking in the world through vigor and simplicity, the culture of the table does so by joining simplicity with cosmic wealth. Humans are such complex and capable beings that they can fairly comprehend the world and, containing it, constitute a cosmos in their own right. Because we are standing so eminently over against the world, to come in touch with the world becomes for us a challenge and a momentous event. In one sense, of course, we are always already in the world, breathing the air, touching the ground, feeling the sun. But as we can in another sense withdraw from the actual and present world, contemplating what is past and to come, what is possible and remote, we celebrate correspondingly our intimacy with the world. This we do most fundamentally when in eating we take in the world in its palpable, colorful, nourishing immediacy. Truly human eating is the union of the primal and the cosmic. In the simplicity of bread and wine, meat and vegetable, the world is gathered.

The great meal of the day, be it at noon or in the evening, is a focal event par excellence. It gathers the scattered family around the table.-And on the table it gathers the most delectable things nature has brought forth. But it also recollects and presents a tradition, the immemorial experiences of the race in identifying and cultivating edible plants; in domesticating and butchering animals; it brings into focus closer relations of national or regional customs, and more intimate traditions still of family recipes and dishes. It is evident from the preceding chapters how this living texture is being rent through the procurement of food as a commodity and the replacement of the culture of the table by the food industry. Once food has

become freely available, it is only consistent that the gathering of the meal is shattered and disintegrates into snacks, T.V. dinners, bites that are grabbed to be eaten; and eating itself is scattered around television shows, late and early meetings, activities, overtime work, and other business. This is increasingly, the normal condition of technological eating. But it is within our power to clear a central space amid the clutter and distraction.

We can begin with the simplicity of a meal that has a beginning, a middle, and an end and that breaks through the superficiality of convenience food in the simple steps of beginning with raw ingredients, preparing and transforming them, and bringing them to the table. In this way we can again become freeholders of our culture. We are disfranchised from world citizenship when the foods we eat are mere commodities. Being essentially opaque surfaces, they repel all efforts at extending our sensibility and competence into the deeper reaches of the world. A Big Mac and a Coke can overwhelm our taste buds and accommodate our hunger. Technology is not, after all, a children's crusade but a principled and skillful enterprise of defining and satisfying human needs. Through the diversion and busyness of consumption we may have unlearned to feel constrained by the shallowness of commodities. But having gotten along for a time and quite well, it seemed, on institutional or convenience food, scales fall from our eyes when we step up to a festively set family table. The foods stand out more clearly, the fragrances are stronger, eating has once more become an occasion that engages and accepts us fully.

To understand the radiance and wealth of a festive meal we must be alive to the interplay of things and humans, of ends and means. At first a meal, once it is on the table, appears to have commodity character since it is now available before us, ready to be consumed without effort or merit. But though there is of course in any eating a moment of mere consuming, in a festive meal eating is one with an order and discipline that challenges and ennobles the participants. The great meal has its structure. It begins with a moment of reflection in which we place ourselves in the presence of the first and last things. It has a sequence of courses; it requires and sponsors memorable conversation; and all this is enacted in the discipline called table manners. They are warranted when they constitute the respectful and skilled response to the great things that are coming to pass in the meal. We can see how order and discipline have collapsed when we eat a Big Mac. In consumption there is the point-like and inconsequential conflation of a sharply delimited human need with an equally contextless and closely fitting commodity. In a Big Mac the sequence of courses has been compacted into one object and the discipline of table manners has been reduced to grabbing and eating. The social context reaches no

further than the pleasant faces and quick hands of the people who run the fast-food outlet. In a festive meal, however, the food is served, one of the most generous gestures human beings are capable of. The serving is of a piece with garnishing; garnishing is the final phase of cooking, and cooking is one with preparing the food. And if we are blessed with rural circumstances, the preparation of food draws near the harvesting and the raising of the vegetables in the garden close by. This context of activities is embodied in persons. The dish and the cook, the vegetable and the gardener tell of one another. Especially when we are guests, much of the meal's deeper context is socially and conversationally mediated. But that mediation has translucence and intelligibility because it extends into the farther and deeper recesses without break and with a bodily immediacy that we too have enacted or at least witnessed firsthand. And what seems to be a mere receiving and consuming of food is in fact the enactment of generosity and gratitude, the affirmation of mutual and perhaps religious obligations. Thus eating in a focal setting differs sharply from the social and cultural anonymity of a fast-food outlet.

The pre-technological world was engaged through and through, and not always positively. There was also ignorance, to be sure, of the final workings of God and King, but even the unknown engaged one in mystery and awe. In this web of engagement meals already had focal character, certainly as soon as there was anything like a culture of the table. Today, however, the great meal does not gather and order a web of thoroughgoing relations of engagement. Within the technological setting, [though] it stands out as a place of profound calm, one in which we can leave behind the narrow concentration and one-sided strain of labor and the tiring and elusive diversity of consumption. In the technological setting, the culture of the table not only focuses our life; it is also distinguished as a place of healing, one that restores us to the depth of the world and to the wholeness of our being.

As said before, we all have had occasion to experience the profound pleasure of an invigorating walk or a festive meal. And on such occasions we may have regretted the scarcity of such events; we might have been ready to allow such events a more regular and central place in our lives. But for the most part these events remain occasional, and indeed the ones that still grace us may be slipping from our grasp. In Chapter 18 we have seen various aspects of this malaise, especially its connection with television. But why are we acting against our better insights and aspirations? This at first seems all the more puzzling as the engagement in a focal activity is for most citizens of the technological society an instantaneous and ubiquitous possibility. On any day I can decide to run or to

prepare a meal after work. Everyone has some sort of suitable equipment. At worst one has to stop on the way home to pick up this or that.

It is of course technology that has opened up these very possibilities. But why are they lying fallow for the most part? There is a convergence of several factors. Labor is exhausting, especially when it is divided. When we come home, we often feel drained and crippled. Diversion and pleasurable consumption appear to be consonant with this sort of disability. They promise to untie the knots and to soothe the aches. And so they do at a shallow level of our existence. At any rate, the call for exertion and engagement seems like a cruel and unjust demand. We have sat in the easy chair, beer at hand and television before us; when we felt stirrings of ambition, we found it easy to ignore our superego. But we also may have had our alibi refuted on occasion when someone to whom we could not say no prevailed on us to put on our coat and to step out into cold and windy weather to take a walk. At first our indignation grew. The discomfort was worse than we had thought. But gradually a transformation set in. Our gait became steady, our blood began to flow vigorously and wash away our tension, we smelled the rain, began thoughtfully to speak with our companion, and finally returned home settled, alert, and with a fatigue that was capable of restful sleep.

But why did such occurrences remain episodes also? The reason lies in the mistaken assumption that the shaping of our lives can be left to a series of individual decisions. Whatever goal in life we entrust to this kind of implementation we in fact surrender to erosion. Such a policy ignores both the frailty and strength of human nature. On the spur of the moment, we normally act out what has been nurtured in our daily practices as they have been shaped by the norms of our time. When we sit in our easy chair and contemplate what to do, we are firmly enmeshed in the framework of technology with our labor behind us and the blessings of our labor about us, the diversions and enrichments of consumption. This arrangement has had our life-long allegiance and we know it to have the approval and support of our fellows. It would take superhuman strength to stand up to this order ever and again. If we are to challenge *the rule of technology*, we can do so only through *the practice of engagement*.

The human ability to establish and commit oneself to a practice reflects our capacity to comprehend the world, to harbor it in its expanse as a context that is oriented by its focal points. To found a practice is to guard a focal concern, to shelter it against the vicissitudes of fate and our frailty. John Rawls has pointed out that there is decisive difference between the justification of a practice and of a particular action falling under it. Analogously, it is one thing to decide for a focal practice and quite another to decide for a particular action that appears to have

focal character. Putting the matter more clearly, we must say that without a practice an engaging action or event can momentarily light up our life, but it cannot order and orient it focally. Competence, excellence, or virtue, as Aristotle first saw, come into being as an *ethos*, a settled disposition and a way of life. Through a practice, Alasdair MacIntyre says accordingly, "human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended." Through a practice we are able to accomplish what remains unattainable when aimed at in a series of individual decisions and acts.

How can a practice be established today? Here, as in the case of focal things, it is helpful to consider the foundation of pre-technological practices. In mythic times the latter were often established through the founding and consecrating act of a divine power or mythic ancestor. Such an act, as mentioned in Chapter 22, set up a sacred precinct and center that gave order to a violent and hostile world. A sacred practice, then, consisted in the regular re-enactment of the founding act, and so it renewed and sustained the order of the world. Christianity came into being this way; the eucharistic meal, the Supper of the Lamb, is its central event, established with the instruction that it be reenacted. Clearly a focal practice today should have centering and orienting force as well. But it differs in important regards from its grand precursors. A mythic focal practice derived much force from the power of its opposition. The alternative to the preservation of the cosmos was chaos, social and physical disorder and collapse. It is a reduction to see mythic practices merely as coping behavior of high survival value. A myth does not just aid survival; it defines what truly human life is. Still, as in the case of pre-technological morality, economic and social factors were interwoven with mythic practices. Thus the force of brute necessity supported though it did not define, mythic focal practices. Since a mythic focal practice united in itself the social, the economic and the cosmic, it was naturally a prominent and public affair. It rested securely in collective memory and in the mutual expectations of the people...

We can now summarize the significance of a focal practice and say that such a practice is required to counter technology in its patterned pervasiveness and to guard focal things in their depth and integrity. Countering technology through a practice is to take account of our susceptibility to technological distraction, and it is also to engage the peculiarly human strength of *comprehension*, i.e., the power to take in the world in its extent and significance and to respond through an enduring commitment. Practically a focal practice comes into being through resoluteness, either an explicit resolution where one vows regularly to engage in a focal activity from this day on or in a more implicit resolve that is nurtured by a focal thing in favorable circumstances and matures into a settled custom.

In considering these practical circumstances we must acknowledge a final difference between focal practices today and their eminent pre-technological predecessors. The latter, being public and prominent, commanded elaborate social and physical settings: hierarchies, offices, ceremonies, and choirs; edifices, altars, implements, and vestments. In comparison our focal practices are humble and scattered. Sometimes they can hardly be called practices, being private and limited. Often they begin as a personal regimen and mature into a routine without ever attaining the social richness that distinguishes a practice. Given the often precarious and inchoate nature of focal practices, evidently focal things and practices, for all the splendor of their simplicity, and their fruitful opposition to technology, must be further clarified in their relation to our everyday world if they are to be seen as a foundation for the reform of technology....