

Palaima: The price of progress is personal memory

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I have devoted my life as a scholar and teacher to exploring what is human in the past. Here I focus on the present. I invite you to imagine what the last 20 years might look like when future generations look back upon the United States in this great age of electronic information and communication. I think this will be seen as the period when we willingly lost our minds — our capacities for personal memory — and therewith a large part of our humanity.

George Orwell in 1948 placed his imagined future in 1984. Screens mounted on walls in large collective spaces and in the small rooms of rundown apartments broadcast what individuals were to think and feel about the present and about a malleable past. Orwell foresaw members of a ruling elite fiercely controlling their own power and doing so ruthlessly through electronic media. Those in power filled the hearts, minds and bodies of ordinary citizens with hatred by fighting continuous wars against now this and now that enemy. Most human beings acquiesced mindlessly — but they were not willing accomplices in their own dehumanization and loss of personal freedom.

We are arguably collectively the freest human beings who have ever lived on this earth. Yet we eagerly buy and use our own instruments of invasion of personal privacy: mobile phones, laptops, tablets and flat-panel TVs. It is harder and harder to find public spaces without screens emitting messages. There is little refuge even at our state flagship research university, where the premium once was placed on

giving students and professors uninterrupted time to explore and think.

There are devices everywhere intruding upon our thoughts, distracting us from our own personal moments, putting us in contact with people who are not there while we ignore the people and things that are there. Ironically, I think of this now as I am writing on my computer and resisting the prompts to check my email.

You may think this is amusing and that life always changes with new technology. We can, of course, too, think of all the clear advantages of instantaneous communication worldwide.

I can instantly contact colleagues in Spain, Greenwich and Los Angeles about research I am doing. I can check on the exact wording of an important passage in Aeschylus, online, in Greek, with helpful notes and precise translations and grammatical explanations. I can make sure my college-age son and stepsons are all right in Boston, East Austin and Hamburg. I can share simultaneously with three generations of family members the prints miraculously electronically restored from old faded negatives I recently found enclosed in letters my father wrote to my mother during his three years at war in the Pacific. We now have our first photos of my Uncle Joey, age 19 in 1942, before he fought as a U.S. Marine at Iwo Jima.

These are all wonderful and good things, but they come with a cost: personal memory.

In my first year of graduate school in the early 1970s, I studied intellectual thought with an old German scholar Friedrich Solmsen. Solmsen had managed to escape Nazi Germany 35 years before. His seminars had no syllabuses, online or otherwise. He directed us personally towards the outside scholarship we each needed to explore the ideas in the texts of Herodotus and Apuleius.

Solmsen later wrote a memoir article about studying in the 1920s with his own mentor Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff, the greatest German classical philologist of that age. In retirement, Wilamowitz

held informal seminars for young professors and advanced graduate students. Wilamowitz would apologize if he brought a book into class. All the texts and all the data surrounding them were in his head. Now, sadly, most classicists access these texts online, not in their own minds.

In Tobias Wolff's *Old School*, one of the teachers at a prep school remarks, "One could not live in a world without stories... Without stories one would hardly know what world one was in." A world where our stories are not in our minds — not an essential and conscious part of who we are — is a poorer world.

The great American medical doctor and poet William Carlos Williams wrote, "It is difficult to get the news from poems, yet men die miserably every day for lack of what is found there." It is even more difficult when the poems are on a hard drive and not in our heads and hearts.