

1

Digital Pulse

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“We become what we pay attention to.”

—William James

To live, your heart—the greatest technology on earth—has to keep beating in rhythm. Your heart beats 100,000 times per day, 36 million times per year, and nearly 2.9 billion times in an average lifetime (if you live to be 80 years old). That’s a lot of heartbeats.

But the modern heartbeat is different than any other time in history. Research shows that the average 18-year-old today will spend roughly 21 of their 80 years on a screen!¹ That suggests that one quarter of your life, or nearly 800 million of your heartbeats, will reverberate in the digital world.

Thankfully, your pulse reflecting these heartbeats reminds you that you’re alive. This physical pulse has a baseline rhythm that is steady and predictable, regardless of your heart rate increasing or decreasing. If your heart gets out of rhythm, it is a sign of something unhealthy like an arrhythmia or A-fib. But I’d like to introduce you to another term specific to our modern life: *digital pulse*. Your digital pulse functions opposite of your physical one. Its baseline is a chaotic rhythm. It starts in A-fib, or better said, D-fib. This is because of the nature of digital content and platforms. They are all over the place on purpose.

On any normal morning, your brain processes a news story about war in Eastern Europe followed by a cute meme of a baby hugging a puppy. Maybe you post a pic of your kindergartner before school—and you’re so proud (as you should be). Next, you repost an inspirational quote from your favorite author (aw, you shouldn’t have!). It’s not that anything you’ve done is necessarily bad; it’s just all over the place. It has no consistent rhythm. The digital pulse isn’t set into rhythm for the purpose of keeping you breathing. It is shocked into divergent reactive rhythms for the purpose of making you catch your breath.

By the time the afternoon hits, you’re keeping up on your stories and you’re seeing your inbox continue to fill up with messages you

haven't responded to. The red numbered circle of notifications on three of your social media thumbnails show more than 50 unread things demanding your action before they can be cleared. Your digital pulse begins to move back and forth from frantic to faint. It reveals the pressure you feel not only to be on all the time but also that if you don't respond to someone or something, you're dead to the world. Your digital pulse feels like the only way to prove to the world that you're still alive and a part of the collective culture and conversation. Without your online presence, would anyone out there even know you're here?

Have you ever had someone say to you, "Hey, are you doing okay?" I sent you a text a couple days ago and I hadn't heard back from you. I was wondering if something went wrong?" This probably made you slightly angry or even guilty of the fact you can't keep up with all of your digital chores of responding to every message that crossed your digital day. And if you feel the pressure with your friends, imagine the pressure you feel at the workplace.

In fact, I've heard from some remote employees about something called *the spoon trick*. A person using this hack places a spoon on their computer mouse to keep their Microsoft Teams status green, giving the illusion that they are active while actually they are doing laundry, working out, or taking a power nap. This reveals how even the workplace has become a place of constant digital demand. We simply can't be everywhere at once, so we are forced to fake being present just to survive. Have you been there? I know I have.

It's hard enough to sustain the day-to-day demands of one's physical life, but to sustain two lives within the same body is impossible. Our digital pulse makes us fall victim to an internalized digital obligation to be constantly present and responsive. Our brains crave the quick dopamine hits that seem to make us "feel alive," but they actually dysregulate our inner rhythms into perpetual, unpredictable chaos.

Humans, you see, are not made to maintain or regulate two pulses. One will eventually disrupt the other. The ancient Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu is purported to have said, "Those who flow as

life flows know they need no other force.” But the truth is, most of us are not flowing, we are buffering. We start to move, then pause, scroll, and stall. That constant start-and-stop rhythm is what I call *life lagging*.

Life Lagging

Life lagging is the gap between how long something should take and how long it actually takes because of distraction. See if you can connect with this example:

HONK!

We have all heard it, the honk at the green light when your head is still down. You look up, embarrassed, and wave an apologetic “sorry” to the car behind you. Multiply that tiny delay by millions of moments each day, and you start to see it: life lagging in action. Each quick glance at a phone, each “just a sec” notification, each tiny pause adds up to time lost and patience drained.

Apps like Google Maps and Waze know this better than anyone. When you see those red lines of traffic ahead, they are not guessing. They are tracking the collective lag of thousands of drivers. One distracted moment here, another there, and soon an entire highway slows to a crawl. The same thing happens in life. Our attention gets jammed. We think we are moving, but we are actually idling in a digital traffic jam of our own making.

Rinse and repeat. We inch forward, having lost those three seconds of time. But across all of society, each of those three-second delays adds up to huge amounts of time lost, energy wasted, and anger or embarrassment felt by the honk givers and the honk receivers. Every day, thousands of hours are affecting millions of people making it to their destinations on time—or even at all. The technology that is meant to help us get ahead faster is actually causing us to lag behind. It is death by a thousand paper cuts of delay. It is not just a traffic issue; it is a life issue.

We are life lagging.

And it is not just on the road; it is everywhere. Take Costco, for example. You notice the perfect parking spot. The car's brake lights glow red. You wait for it to back out. And wait. And wait. But the car does not move. The driver is sitting there, idling, ensuring their digital pulse is alive and well. Scrolling. Liking. Replying. All the while, you are stuck in a holding pattern, watching your chance at free samples slip away. Their lagging is literally keeping you from replenishing your stash of paper towels and toilet paper!

The same thing happens in our homes. In our family, my wife usually makes the kids' lunches because she is a creative genius in the kitchen. When she makes them, the kids experience all the tastes and colors of the culinary rainbow. In the case of these school lunches, variety truly is the spice of life. When I make the lunches, not so much. But I make them substantially faster than she does. The variety may be missing, but the task gets accomplished in a fraction of the time. (Guess which lunches the kids prefer.)

In this lunch-making family odyssey, I have noticed a trend: the whole process often leaves my wife frustrated. I will see her take out the peanut butter and jelly to start the task while I take the kids upstairs to make sure they are not fighting over who is using mom and dad's bathroom. I get them finished with a 30-minute shower and lead them through the nightly process of brushing their teeth without sword fighting—or stabbing—each other with their toothbrushes. (Again, it is an odyssey.) But when I come back downstairs, I often find the containers still open and the dry bread slices still begging for a little peanut butter and jelly.

The thing is, my wife is still standing there. Her phone, however, is held up to her mouth on speaker as she finishes sending a three-minute audio message to a friend whom I did not even know she had been talking to. Somewhere between spreading the peanut butter and

sealing the sandwich bag, a message popped up on her phone. Then another. Someone needed a recipe. Someone else needed prayer. A friend shared a struggle. She listened, cared, and responded because that is who she is, an encourager. But the lunches are still sitting half-made, the peanut-butter jar open, the knife midair. It is not her fault. It is life lagging again.

Even when our hearts are in the right place, our attention is divided. Take sleep, for example: how many mornings do you wake feeling tired wishing you would have gotten more rest? Now think about how your phone affects your nighttime routine. Just consider that, rather than sleeping, when we add an extra 30 minutes each night on the phone over the course of 30 days, the lag adds up to a loss of 15 hours of sleep ($30 \text{ minutes} \times 30 \text{ days} = 900 \text{ minutes} / 60 = 15 \text{ hours}$).

Divided attention always costs us something: time, peace, patience, or rest. That is life lagging, the collision of good intentions and divided attention. It is not malicious. It is just modern. But it is slowly robbing us of something far more valuable than time: our sense of rhythm, flow, and presence in the world around us.

The Age of Distraction

Our digital pulse is accelerating, while our human lives are lagging, creating what I call the *Age of Distraction*. Ours is a moment in history defined not by a lack of information, but by an overwhelming excess of it. Heck, I was a paperboy for two years in the early 1990s and the only “news” I consumed was the first five minutes of the local 6 p.m. news right after an episode of *The Simpsons*. Nowadays, our devices are faster than ever, our feeds never stop, and our attention is pulled in countless directions at once. To understand how we arrived here and why hope still matters, it helps to step back and look at the eras that have shaped the world before us—and that could shape the world ahead of us, if we dare to hope and dream.

Era	Approximate Time Frame	Defining Influence
Industrial Age	1900–1940s	Machines, productivity, efficiency
Atomic Age	1945–1960s	Power, progress, existential risk
Television Age	1950s–1980s	Mass media, shared narratives
Information Age	1990s–2000s	Computers, internet, access
Social Media Age	2000–2010s	Connectivity, visibility, validation
Age of Distraction	2015–Present	Speed, overload, fractured attention
Age of Presence?	Future	Intention, connection, wisdom

As the world continues to spin, my hope is that this book ignites within us a shared intention for our world to be more present and focused on true connection through wisdom, wonder, and the greatest gift of all: you!

You Are a Gift

This is a book for humans. (No offense to any bots out there—you are also welcome to buy a copy. Or to put it into words you can understand “01001000 01101001” [“Hi”].) But this book is about navigating the rising tensions of balancing our shared humanity with our ever-widening digitality. If you’re like me, when you lose this balance, you lose something much more critical: the gift of yourself.

Human connection remains our greatest need because each of us is a gift created for continual exchange and mutual connection to others, who are also gifts in their own right. But *connection* has become such a buzzword that we struggle to muster a practical understanding or approach to finding it. We crave it and resist it at the same time.

The chaotic pulse is in conflict with the steady pulse. And we often don't even know why this tension exists.

This is why the unique challenges of the Age of Distraction require us to adopt a more intentional approach to human connection, one that begins by awakening both to what fosters presence in our lives and what robs us of it. As we have become more individualized and less connected, it is easy to feel and believe that what consumes our thinking and habits is harmless. Who cares if I spend four hours scrolling on my phone? It's not like I'm hurting anybody?

But if your pulse is dysregulated, it affects both you and everyone around you—just ask someone giving first aid or CPR. That's why we need to look into how your online habits shape how you see yourself, how you see others, and how you see our future together. Again, this doesn't mean we need to stop using technology. We just need to stop being ignorant to how it affects us, whether positively and negatively.

Back in the 1990s, when you wanted to wash your car, you would buy one of these huge yellow sponges—the kind that could soak up a bathtub of water. Your brain, your mind, and your heart are like one big sponge. Every morning, what you dip that sponge into is what's going to ring out of it for the rest of the day. You already know this from your own honest experience, but the data also supports the fact most of us reach for our phones in the morning before we've even used the bathroom or brushed our teeth.

To borrow from another metaphor, it's like waking up and immediately taking in huge helpings of sugary, dense, digital calories through news headlines, notifications, and reels. Within minutes, these empty digital calories leave you feeling bloated, overstimulated, and fearful of the future all at the same time—and all before you've even gotten out of bed!

If you consider yourself an average user on Facebook, you probably check your profile once an hour, often just to fill the space of a quiet or boring moment. Scrolling through dozens of posts and skimming the birthdays, baby announcements, and beautiful pictures of

loved ones disrupts your fear of stillness. Of course, not everything you're digesting during this scroll session is uplifting. Much is just the opposite: death notices, car accidents, natural disasters, and other reasons to worry.

Although these are real parts of life, traumatic news has become the new norm for information. Here's a few more headlines during a recent scroll in the park:

- Breaking: School lockdown after threat posted online
- War escalates overnight as global leaders warn of wider conflict
- New virus variant detected as health officials urge caution
- Teen hospitalized after viral social media challenge
- Mass shooting dominates feeds as details emerge in real time
- Wildfires force evacuations as climate extremes intensify
- AI-generated deepfake sparks outrage and confusion
- Influencer death trends across platforms within minutes
- Missing child alert floods phones nationwide

Although these topics warrant being shared, sheer volume of our exposure to disaster and fear is dangerous to our emotional and spiritual health. But we do it anyway, mainly because our brains like to be aroused. The amygdala (our emotional center) becomes activated when we process traumatic news during an innocent scroll. Better known for the fight-or-flight response, the amygdala releases a chemical cascade of adrenaline and cortisol, a stress hormone intended to help us run from a dangerous situation. Now, we feel it all the time.

Post-Traumatic Scroll Disorder

The amygdala struggles to decipher between trauma in our virtual world and trauma in our physical world. Nowadays, such traumatic posts fuel our dates and dinner table conversations, planning seeds of fear in our fertile minds. It's no wonder our bodies are constantly tired from being dragged along by the undertows of the tidal wave of

trauma we call normal scrolling. If you find yourself being force-fed emotionally charged posts on Facebook or TikTok, beware because your foundation is susceptible to heartache and stress. Hairline fractures in our personal psyches come from spikes in adrenaline and from exhaustion leading to what I call *post-traumatic scroll disorder*.

Post-traumatic *stress* disorder is a serious mental health condition that has afflicted some of my friends and family. But I've literally seen loved ones mentally suffer from what they've seen on social media. Even if they don't click on the post to read more, the fact that they've exposed their minds to even the headline of such news can hinder their perspective for the entire day, week, or longer. Innocent scrolling yields feelings of sadness, depression, and dread. Can you agree that maybe we're being traumatized more than we realize?

For example, I was with my wife purchasing a new used car. It was a significant moment as we had been saving up for a few years and waiting for the right car to buy. After months of research, and way too many searches on Facebook Marketplace, the day had arrived. We scheduled a day date to go pick up the new, certified used car, and even drove 90 minutes to the dealership. While we were waiting for paperwork to sign the deal, I turned to her and noticed she was looking rather sad. I paused and asked her what was the matter? She said with tears in her eyes, "James Van Der Beek just died."

I said, "The guy from *Dawson's Creek*?" To which she responded yes, as a few tears ran down her face.

Although this news is super sad and devastating to his family, it was colliding with a moment of excitement and joy moments before signing on the dotted line. Don't get me wrong, I'm not trying to sound insensitive, I'm just sharing how our digital lives can shape the mood of our real-life moments. Even though we didn't truly know James, he was a dad, husband, and about our age, so the real-time knowledge of his passing, created instant sadness and arousal within her brain. This example, is one of many that showcases a deep black hole of empathy for all of the sadness being shared on the internet to be dumped on the fertile soil of our hearts and brains.

All of this is a result of what I like to call *The Imitation Principle*. Simply put, your inputs become your output. If you are what you eat, then what you are consuming online on a daily basis (and how you consume it) is not harmless. No, it is literally shaping who you are and how you see the world. From serious geopolitical issues to funny viral memes that your kids spread like wildfire, we're all reflecting what we receive, for better or for worse. Everything you do—or don't do—shapes your heart in some way.

The good news is the modern technology swirling around you can't compete with the greatest technology beating within you. The trick is keeping the former from robbing the latter—not to lose the freedom and connection that make you the gift you are created to be. That's why I'm writing this book for you now: to share this little time capsule I'm leaving for my grandchildren as they navigate whatever confusion or opportunities arise between this moment and 80 years from now.

Yes, as you will hear in my own personal stories to come, sharing your heart can be messy, mucky, and painful. But you can develop the courage to disabuse your heart of the false narratives of isolation and disconnection being passed off as normal in the modern world. You can better know and better give to others the gift of yourself.

Reflection

When do you tend to fall into patterns of life lagging or find your digital pulse beating too fast?

