Flourishing at Life in a Digital Age: Is Gen Z the Canary?

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Abstract

Concerns around the impact that portable digital technology would have on emerging generations have been circulating for years, but without the evidence from a generation experiencing these devices, it has all been speculation. Now, research is becoming available that shares the results of living in a digital age and the impact it is having on the health and well-being of college students. This essay attempts to demonstrate that it is important that higher education challenge students to intentionally consider the approach they take as to how they allow digital devices (and their programs and applications) into their daily lives. Encouraging Christians to thoughtfully develop a digital philosophy is one way to address the issues surrounding health and the role digital devices play in one's well-being.

Keywords: Gen Z, faith and mental health, digital technology and spiritual formation, mental health and digital technology

In 2020, the question arose—*Is Gen Z the Canary?* And in 2024, I believe Jonathan Haidt, along with many other wise and thoughtful researchers, is providing the desperately needed answers to this inquiry. And they are answering this question with a resounding *Yes!* Unfortunately for Gen Z, they became the trailblazers, opening our eyes to how portable digital technology is impacting our culture, and now they are the ones who may be facing challenges from our lack of knowledge, wisdom, and guidance. The concerns, which began for me around 2011 during a second decade teaching in Christian higher education, are being validated now more than ever. Insightful researchers, academics, parents, and pastors are shining a light onto the struggles of a "phone-based childhood" (p. 7) as Haidt (2024) describes it, and I believe this is a siren call to any of us blessed with an opportunity to influence future generations as they enter emerging adulthood. We cannot ignore what we now know.

Spending 52 years living in West Tennessee, I had little exposure to the inner workings of a coal mine, but recent viewings of period dramas have provided me a glimpse into what was, and still can be, a dangerous occupation. As a result, when Cal Newport (2019) uses the phrase "a cognitive canary in a coal mine" (p. 104) in describing Gen Z, the imagery resonated in a new way. Years ago, in the coal mining process, workers would transport a canary in a cage as a warning device against leaking gases. Since these dangerous gases would kill the canary first, the miners would be alerted to exit as quickly as possible to avoid the same fate. Today, I believe Gen Z is the canary warning us of digital dangers that pose a threat to our safety. According to the Cambridge dictionary (2025), the idiom *canary in a coal mine* means "something that gives an early warning of danger or failure," (top of page) and I believe if we do not heed the warnings Gen Z is now providing, we will continue to have "an epidemic of mental illness" (Haidt, 2024, front cover). Newport (2019) shares the extensive use of digital devices by this generation and comments,

> As most parents or educators of this generation will attest, their device use is constant. (The term constant is not hyperbole: a 2015 study by Common Sense Media found that teenagers were consuming media—including text messaging and social networks—nine hours per day on average.) This group, therefore, can play the role of a cognitive canary in the coal mine**.** If persistent solitude deprivation causes problems, we should see them show up here first. (p. 107)

As a faculty member in Christian higher education, specifically in the discipline of health and human performance, I feel an intense responsibility for the mental well-being of our students, as well as all eight dimensions of health: emotional, environmental, financial, intellectual, vocational, physical, social, and spiritual (Nemec et al., 2015). Each of these dimensions overlaps with the others at various moments in time, much like a Venn diagram, demonstrating the relationship and impact that one area of health has on the others. With the wealth of information available to us from the medical community, it seems we have a greater understanding of the physical health dimension now more than ever before; yet, in some ways, it seems we are lagging in understanding that, not only do we need to be healthy physically, but the other dimensions of health also need attention. And I posit that there is one element in our lives that, without question, significantly impacts all dimensions of our health, and that is the philosophy we embody towards digital devices. It's time for

us to seek avenues to improve the health and well-being of the canaries that we've helped to damage because we did not understand the consequences that the digital age would bring.

Generational Theory and Emerging Adulthood

To provide a brief overview for this conversation, but not to journey too deep into the weeds, there are two concepts that might need a clarifying explanation because they serve as a foundational framework for the significance of this topic--Generation Z and emerging adulthood. With so many valuable resources currently available about the various generations and their unique attributes, I will avoid sharing that minutia here except to describe who Gen Z is and why this matters to leaders now. I will encourage anyone engaging with this generation to read more, specifically with regard to the setting that provides context for that relationship: parenting, education, human resources, organizational leadership, and especially in faith-based situations. But for now, let's see if we can arrive at a mutual understanding of who Gen Z is. Seemiller and Grace (2019) refer to Gen Z as those born from 1995 to 2010. Having their world completely shaped by the internet, they are often also aptly referred to as digital natives, the Net Generation, or iGeneration. Rachel Jones (2019) uses the descriptor "Generation Rent" (p. 49), which seems applicable when one considers how little ownership this generation actually has, as they *rent* streaming music and videos, textbooks, and even their smartphones which are *rented* as they pay by the month, only to *resubscribe* for an updated version as soon as the previous one is *paid* for. This observation is neither positive nor negative, but when specifically combined with characteristics of emerging adulthood, it can provide a framework to understanding their sense of instability.

Emerging adulthood is a term uncovered during my doctoral studies that, over the years, consistently describes the season of life for most college students. The term, coined by Jeff Arnett (2000), describes emerging adulthood as the period from approximately 18 to 29 years of age that now constitutes a distinct life stage that is neither adolescence nor adulthood. Arnett describes five features of this stage of life that make it distinctive, including identity exploration, instability, self-focus, feeling in-between, and feeling possibilities/optimism. The paradox of possibilities that an emerging adult must grapple with during this season can be overwhelming. Throughout their previous seasons of development, there was often a guide, such as a teacher or parent, who walked them through the steps to reach the next level of development. Now, they are entering a place where the lists to follow, such as a curriculum map, are coming to an end. This leads emerging adults to face tough decisions about not only what they might want to do vocationally with their life, but more importantly, whom they want to become.

Adulthood is an interesting word that modern culture has creatively turned into a verb; a descriptor becoming so popular that one can now purchase stickers related to these unfavorable tasks and adhere them to a calendar in order to feel a sense of achievement. So, instead of the excitement of flourishing in a new season of life, we are faced with emerging adults who view this stage of independence as one to be delayed as long as possible. Returning to their family home after graduating college is no longer taboo; instead, it's a common practice for emerging adults to move in with family members. So, why does it matter if Gen Z chooses to move back home and delay

accepting the full responsibilities of adulthood? I'm sure we could develop an extensive list of reasons both for and against this delay of independence, but my focus here is on what this means for those of us who are walking side-by-side with these emerging adults and attempting to prepare them for both professional and personal lives that flourish. My dream is for our students to emerge from college not only prepared for the next season of life but equipped to flourish in that season. So, let's explore one of the obstacles that might be standing in their way—digital devices.

Device-Versus Play-Based Living

In his book *The Anxious Generation: How the Great Rewiring of Childhood is Causing an Epidemic of Mental Illness*, Jonathan Haidt (2024) explains,

> The Great Rewiring is not just about changes in the technologies that shaped children's days and minds. There's a second plotline here: the well-intentioned and disastrous shift toward overprotecting children and restricting their autonomy in the real world. Children need a great deal of play to [flourish]…free play began to decline in the 1980s, and the decline accelerated in the 1990s…Unsupervised outdoor play declined at the same time that the personal computer became more common and more inviting as a place for spending free time. (p. 7)

The debate over organized versus free-play has been a hot topic since the early 1990s when I chose to major in physical education and health; however, Haidt brings this issue to light from a new perspective, in that not only has commercialized sport altered the landscape for children by limiting a play-based childhood, there is now the reality that Gen Z has been the canary for what it looks like to experience a phone-based childhood. "I use 'phone-based' broadly to include all of the internet-connected personal electronics that came to fill young people's time, including laptop computers, tablets, internet-connected video game consoles, and most important, smartphones will millions of apps" (p. 7). Haidt's central claim in the Great Rewiring relates to "two trends—*overprotection in the real world and underprotection in the virtual world"* (p. 9).

Let me attempt to paint a picture for you. On a wide path that meanders among creeks, trees, grasses, critters on the ground, and birds in the trees is a beautiful and relaxing setting, to walk, run, or bike, but what often draws my attention are people. For the most part, they can be divided into roughly two groups: those under the age of 30 and those over. Those *under 30* will often model characteristics associated with what Haidt terms a "phone-based childhood," (p. 7), while those *over 30* likely demonstrate what was a "play-based childhood" (p. 7). Perhaps you can already picture what I'm about to describe. Those *under* the age of 30 on the walking path, passing me heading in the opposite direction, rarely make eye contact, much less offer a verbal greeting, even if their eyes are not focused on their phones. Those *over* the age of 30 will, for the most part, look me in the eye and often offer a verbal greeting such as "Good Morning!" even if they are listening to something via a device. Immersion in digital devices, along with the safety issue of encountering a stranger, has led to a new experience within our culture.

Now, picture a college classroom and multiply this scene by the number of students in the room. This generational disposition of concern for safety carries over into the classroom, where students are hesitant to speak to *strangers* even in a safe setting. This hesitancy to communicate with others alters the tone and mood of the learning environment, creating a more

anxious environment. Haidt (2024) shares the latest research that now exists on one of the causes behind the rising rates of anxiety and depression—the smartphone and other screened devices that remove us from the real world. Building off the ideas that he shared in *Coddling of the American Mind*, that "people born in and after 1996 were different, psychologically, from those who had been born just a few years prior," (p. 13) Haidt considers the issue as larger than just our devices, it's also "a historic and unprecedented transformation of human childhood" (p. 14). Haidt offers four foundational reforms that would provide a healthier childhood in the digital age: *(1) No smartphones before high school, (2) No social media before 16, (3) Phone-free schools, and (4) Far more unsupervised play and childhood independence*. He shares the in-depth research supporting each of his reforms and it mirrors what I recommend as developing a digital philosophy for individuals, families, schools, and other communities.

Digital Philosophy

There is not enough space here to share all the valuable information Haidt offers, but many respected researchers and academics are raising a red flag, sharing the potential damage that has been done to a generation of canaries that should no longer be ignored. Whether it is developing a digital philosophy, engaging in reforms, cultivating healthy habits, or just making an intentional decision to let them play, our children need us to act before our culture continues down a road of even more unhealthy futures. The challenge is that *change* means swimming upstream of popular culture, approaching life in a different manner, and protecting the health of our children as we nurture, instruct, coach, guide, or mentor. There are no easy answers, but there might be some simple ones if we commit to enhancing the culture of our shared life and to one another's flourishing. We know that "Children [flourish] when they are rooted in real-world communities, not in disembodied virtual networks. Growing up in the virtual world promotes anxiety, anomie, and loneliness. The Great Rewiring of Childhood, from play-based to phone-based, has been a catastrophic failure" (Haidt 2024, p. 293). Now, what can we do to change the future?

One option that I believe is essential to turning the tide for this anxious generation is to engage in meaningful conversation about what it truly means to flourish in life in a digital age. And for this to occur, we *all* need to intentionally create a digital philosophy. A personal moment in coming to see the need for a digital philosophy, which is being affirmed again and again by data, occurred during a faculty dialogue group as we read Jean Twenge's (2017) *iGen*. Dr. C. Ben Mitchell queried the group to see if we all felt the angst and concern over this emerging generation after reading the statistics Twenge presents on the increasing health issues related to anxiety, stress, and depression. Approaching the information from a different perspective, I shared my experience of *hopefulness* after reading the content. Yes, I am discouraged when I ponder the depressing statistics, but at the same time, if an issue can be identified, then I feel empowered to work towards improvements, if not a remedy, to the problems. Being provided with tangible research explaining the differences being seen in students offers me optimism that we can intervene and become proactive with students to mitigate some of these issues and equip them to have a flourishing life.

In an effort to guide us in creating a digital philosophy and to guide those within our sphere of influence to do the same, we can start with J.M. Comer's suggestions in *The Ruthless Elimination of Hurry* (2019) to

parent our phones. Again, it seems a simple suggestion, but not one so easily carried out:

> Parent your phone; put it to bed before you and make it sleep in. TV's and my phones 'go to bed' at the same time as our kids: 8:30 p.m., sharp. We literally set them to airplane mode and put them in the drawer in the kitchen. Otherwise we burn time and end up frying our brains with blue screens rather than winding down for bed with a good book, or you know, couples stuff. (Comer 2019, pp. 227-228)

When I consider parenting, or any other position of influence over emerging generations, I wonder how many of us have created rules about our phones in the same manner that we have established rules for drinking, cursing, driving, and other forms of behavior, especially when guidance is so often needed during these critical years of development. Amy Blankson (2017) mirrors Comer and many others when she shares,

> The further we get from our authentic selves, the further we move from becoming our ideal selves. The way that we prevent that 'mission drift' is by grounding ourselves in a set of guiding principles that inform our behaviors and habits. (p. 37)

To me, this communicates that if we desire to be our flourishing selves, it may be necessary to take a difficult stance and create a digital philosophy grounded in timeless wisdom.

Before discussing this issue as it relates specifically to spiritual formation, I want to share some of the research from a digital dilemmas project by Weinstein and James (2022) that identifies some of the "important gaps between adults' common assumptions and teens' realities" (p. 2) when it comes to digital devices because these gaps impact us regardless of the worldview being used to guide our digital philosophy. One of these gaps relates to the idea of *digital habits,* where:

> Adults assume teens are reluctant to part with their phones or turn off notifications because they are "addicted"…[but] disconnecting means being out of the loop socially, risking been seen as rude, or worse, being unavailable for a struggling friend. These burdens are a constant tension with parents messages to "get off your phone". (p. 2)

By working together to develop a digital personal or family philosophy, adults and teens address what they really *do* need:

> To be sure, schools that create space for digital literacy education. Tech designers who re-prioritize for youth well-being (and policies that ensure it). Caring adults who stay alert to digital dilemmas, set warranted boundaries, and offer empathy, connection and validation. This all requires that we address the fundamental ways digital life is undercutting teens' agency at a developmental moment when it really matters. (p. 162)

By helping teens navigate these complicated dilemmas, we help position them to better cope with the stressors of life that are surely to come. "This begs the question: If teens' digital stresses are often rooted in a sense of compromised agency and control, how can we authentically empower more agency and well-being?" (p. 163) I believe this empowerment can occur with authentic and open communication about the role of digital devices in their life.

One of the key elements to cultivating a digital philosophy is the idea of pre-deciding, which has been extensively discussed by wise communicators such as Andy Stanley, Craig Groeschel (2024), and many more. Groeschel offers,

> Your decisions determine your direction, and your direction determines your destiny…So if your life is moving in the direction of your decisions, do you like the direction your decisions are taking you? Do you feel good about who you are and where you are in life? Do you believe God is pleased with your direction? (p. 8)

Sharing three immediate benefits to pre-decision: reducing the number of decisions to make, reducing the fear of deciding wrong, and preventing emotions from taking over, Groeschel encourages all of us to discuss options *before* a decision is actually needed. Personally, as a teenager, this meant having a discussion about *what to do if* a particular situation arose: What if a friend starts drinking and they are the person who drove? What if a date goes badly and you start to feel uncomfortable and need to get out? Because my parents and I had pre-decided how to respond in those highly emotional and stressful situations, I was given personal agency to make the best decision possible. That not only positioned me to make wise decisions in those particular scenarios but also provided the groundwork for adulthood when I needed to make tough decisions on my own. Good parenting strategies, a play-based childhood, and a Christian faith equipped me to live a flourishing life, regardless of what technology would arrive to try to distract me from a life of meaning and purpose.

Spiritual Formation

While there are many resources that offer meaningful guidance to living in a digital age as have been referenced previously, when it relates to conversations about spiritual formation in a digital age and why crafting a digital philosophy is so vital to our health and well-being, three resources I find particularly compelling are C. Ben Mitchell's *How Do We Live in a Digital World?*, Felicia W. Song's *Restless Devices*, and Tim Challies' *The Next Story*. Mitchell (2021) shares,

> Information retrieval, economic growth, digital religion, and access to education represent significant sectors of opportunity that the burgeoning digital revolution is helping us realize. As with nearly every other arena of life, however, there are both benefits and burdens. An accurate benefits versus burdens calculus may help us determine whether or not digital media are a net gain or a net loss; but it may well turn out to be more complex than that…we should develop criteria for making better informed choices. (p. 27)

So, Mitchell continues with a profound question, "Does digital technology contribute to human flourishing?" (p. 27), which leads to the need to examine what human flourishing is and what role leaders are playing in guiding emerging adults.

Turning to Felicia W. Song's (2021) appeal to current church communities to speak into the lives of emerging adults and beyond, she discusses the role of mindfulness and meditation from Christian tradition as a guide to navigating the digital life, which can also be applied to Christian higher education communities. Song offers,

> Extending counterliturgies beyond our individual lives, followers of Jesus have opportunities to not just change our own behaviors but actually affect the rules of the game in any given institution for the common good. As nonreligious institutions like art museums encourage contemplative engagement in their sacred space, I can't help but wonder: Do Christians dare to believe the same thing about

> our own sacred spaces—in our churches, at our dinner tables, in our beds, in our classrooms, in our relationships with each other? (p. 195)

Wong recognizes that "altering our digital practices is swimming upstream, possibly costing us relationships and our personal and professional reputations" (p. 196). The struggle to live differently is real and organizations of faith should be there to "help, not hinder, our capacity to commune with God, to inhabit time, and to be faithfully present to others and to places" (p. 197). Perhaps, this is what cultivating a digital philosophy will allow us to do: to pre-decide how we will inhabit time with our devices, the people around us, and our relationship to God.

Mitchell, Wong, and Challies recognize that many are grappling with the same questions, whether it's in the areas of medicine, theology, philosophy, or human performance. What does it look like to flourish at life as a Christian in the digital age? Challies (2015) shares,

> We cannot run away from digital technology—mobile phones and computers and the Internet and television are likely to be with us in one form or another for some time. Nor would we necessarily want to run away from them. Certainly, not all technology is harmful or dangerous. Is there a way, then, to live virtuously, immersed in this strange new digital reality? (pp. 13-14)

Wong (2021) adds to this sentiment,

> Sure, we can try little tricks to restrain our appetites, like charging our phones on the other side of the house…But that is fundamentally different from having our minds, hearts, and consciousness freed from the nagging curiosities of what's new on social media…How do we bridge this gap? And what role can the church play in this bridging which is at the heart of one's spiritual formation? (p. 202)

Through the development of a digital philosophy, we actively engage in more than a self-improvement plan; instead, we choose:

> the fundamental disciplines of following after Jesus Christ that we can begin to become a people capable of attending to the hiddenness of God; a people unthreatened by interruption; a people arrested by the natural beauty of the world; a people who show us and 'go through' with others in our faithful presence; and a people who can taste what is means to welcome the Sabbath with exuberant delight. (Wong 2021, p. 204)

Wong suggests that:

> we need to roll up our sleeves and spend time exploring, contemplating, and investigating the theological resources and historical traditions that we can bring to bear on recovering our sense of place, presence, and personhood within the complex reality of our digital ecology. (p. 207)

Like Mitchell and Wong, Challies (2015) asks us to examine what it means to flourish in life in a digital age as a discerning Christian:

> [In] disciplined discernment…a Christian looks carefully at the new realities, weighs and evaluates them, and educates himself, thinking deeply about the potential consequences and effects of using a particular technology…He moves beyond the broad strokes of utter rejection and complete acceptance. Instead, he relies on the Holy Spirit,

> who speaks his wisdom through the Bible, to learn how we can live with virtue in this new digital world. (p. 17)

It is this discernment that emerging adults need guidance with, and if we focus on their spiritual formation, rather than the current existing technology, they are then equipped to handle whatever technologies arrive during their lifetime. So, where does a parent, an educator, a coach begin? With a resource that is never outdated. Challies (2015) offers an answer,

> Through it all we will let God's Word, the Bible, guide, inform, and convict us. It may seem counterintuitive that in our quest to seek how we can live with virtue in a digital age, we will all rely on a book that is thousands of years old—a book that was first recorded not on a computer or even paper, but on old, dusty scrolls. Before that, it lived only in human memory, passed from one person to the next through oral transmission. Our first impulse may be to scoff at such a thing…Yet it is exactly the Bible's long track record that gives it credence on this topic. It has survived and thrived through every technological change and every technological era. The wisdom that has steered humans since the earliest days can surely direct us as well. And so we begin, trusting God to guide us, as we look at life and faith after the digital explosion. (p. 18)

The reality is that to flourish at life in a digital age means that any suggestions offered must be more:

> *descriptive* than *prescriptive*. I cannot tell you how you should live your life, and I certainly don't want to pretend that I know how to legislate the best way to live with technology in your home, with your family, at your job, or in your church. I want you to take what's true and have these things shape your relationship with technology in a way that suits your unique situation. (Challies 2015, p. 205)

Whatever the role one might have with emerging adults, there is a weightiness to serving as a "guide by their side" while they discover their identities away from their families of origin, while they uncover their gifts and talents, and while they are being transformed into the adults God is creating them to be where they will hopefully find purpose and meaning through various vocations. Encouraging emerging adults to craft healthy habits, like cultivating a digital philosophy, is just one of the many ways Gen Z needs our guidance. As the adults that were a generation ahead, we were not privileged to know in advance how the digital age would impact their childhoods, but now we do know, and I believe we should help them develop coping strategies to deal with the stressors these digital devices have created in their lives, and one of those strategies is helping them cultivate a digital philosophy for themselves grounded in the valuable truth of Scripture that has stood the test of time regardless of what technology that comes along.

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