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Facing the Music

Unintended Consequences in the Digital Age

Good afternoon and thank you for the honour of addressing you today.

Before I begin, I wish to take the opportunity to personally thank the members of the Rotary Club for all the incredible contributions you make in so many facets of our community.

Most recently, I think of the Stratford Perth Rotary Hospice. As someone who cared for my mother in the last two years of her life, I came to know full well how vital these kinds of initiatives are, and I commend you on your meaningful on-going work.

I'm always honoured to be invited to speak and yet often struggle as to what to speak on. Not because I'm short of things to say (as anyone who works with me will attest) but really what to choose from in a wide array of passions, travels and experiences. In fact, at an earlier point I thought I would speak on my experience as the Honorary Colonel of the Royal Canadian Air Force.

But after a bit more reflection, I decided to share with you some of my thoughts as they've developed over the past 20 years with respect to progress and unintended consequences, as initially experienced via the music business.

But let me begin by telling you a bit about myself, how I came to this community and how I came to do what I have done.

MANITOBA YEARS

I grew up in a small town in Manitoba called Morden. My mother was a public health nurse and my father was a fourth-generation cattle dealer who ran his own business.

Along with my parents and both sets of grandparents, there were aunts & uncles and family friends who lived close by. We shared meals together, especially and including traditional Sunday dinners. We met at various social gatherings, at variety nights, at dances or skating.

As kids, we had paper routes and the run of the town, and, of course, we were told not to come home until the street lights had come on. The concept of a 'play date' would have been as foreign as Mars.

The milkman lived with his family just down the street and many a morning, my childhood slumber would be jostled by the tinkle of the milk bottles on the step, as the streets and town life were slowly awakening.

We would walk to school and back each day and our parents knew our teachers. Our teachers knew our parents. Home and school sang from the same song sheet as it pertained to values, discipline and attendance. The teachers lived in the community, and we would see them at the grocery store or at church.

One set of grandparents lived on a farm only two blocks from our house in town and at which my brother and I would spend many of our formative non-school hours.

As young children, we would play in the hay loft, ride a little pony called *Channey Boy*, and climb trees with our friends. By adolescence, we would be doing many of the chores, feeding a couple hundred head of cattle, even in the dead of winter at thirty-below.

Although I was always involved in music, and later in sports, I grew up dreaming of being a veterinarian. Never did I think of a career in music, and I often say that music chose me, rather than me, it.

In many ways, it was a charmed childhood and I had excellent models in my parents. The community was small enough that everyone knew and looked after each other. As with many rural communities, it operated as a hybrid of self-sufficiency and community service.

MOVING TOR STRATFORD

I moved to Stratford in 1981 to join the Stratford Festival Theatre. I worked as a singer, actress and composer for four years before beginning the career path I'm presently on.

It was a deeply enriching and influential experience, and a great privilege to work with some of the best actors, directors, and production crew this country has seen. Without doubt, it shaped many aspects of my own creative process.

STARTING IN THE MUSIC BUSINESS

By 1985, armed with the loan of \$10,000 (*the money my parents had ear marked for my veterinarian studies*) and a book called "*How to make your own Record*", I made my first recording in a small studio, set up in a barn just outside Elora, Ontario.

I hired a local photographer and graphic designer to create the artwork, and struck up an account at the local Stratford Beacon Herald Printers to print the cassette covers.

Initially, I ran off thirty cassettes at a plant in Toronto and gave half of them to friends and family and then wondered what to do with the rest of them.

I decided to take up the tried and true tradition of busking, or singing on the street... often at the St. Lawrence Market in Toronto.

It was initially unnerving, but I would soon come to find it was generating a reasonable income, and would provide for me the vital funds for my next recordings and to launch touring.

It wasn't without its colourful moments though. I recall a friend from Winnipeg (*whom I'd not seen for quite some time*) emerging from the back of a group of people, tears in her eyes, saying "O, Loreena, has it come to this?"

Through the years, I would establish multiple retail accounts with music and non-music stores, in this community and across the country. As I started to tour, I would sell my recordings at my performances. By 1989, my then three recordings were selling in the tens of thousands on both cassette and CD formats, and would soon garner the attention of the major record companies. In 1991, I would sign a licensing deal with Warner Music Canada, and as a result of this, my recordings would be available worldwide.

They were heady years to be sure. Also by 1991, I would find the need to move my table-top operations from the farm house on Quinlan Road, to an office in downtown Stratford and start hiring staff. I would be a rare artist, who would not have management and, as I would often say, I was '*unmanageable*' anyway.

At the apex of my career around 1998, I had established one office in Stratford and one in London, England. I had more than 15 people working on marketing, publicity, mail order, touring and more. We had now entered into sales which were in the millions.

THE END OF AN ERA AND THE BEGINNING OF THE NEXT ONE

Little did I know, however, that this was the year *'the music died'*, or perhaps more accurately, the industry started to die.

At first it wasn't quite evident what was happening, but one soon heard of the new players on the block. Napster—a massive illegal digital file-sharing platform—and the internet were just getting on their feet. Like a relentless, voracious reptile, it set in motion years of rampant file sharing, illegal downloading and piracy. Copyright legislation and enforcement had simply not kept up with the march of technology, a theme which would only become too familiar over the next 20 years.

After taking some personal time between 1998 and the release of my next recording in 2006, I would hardly know the industry. As its collapse of sales were so pronounced, it was clear that it was in free-fall.

What had happened I wondered? In 1998, the music industry was promised a *'Golden Age'* with the internet. Our music would be more available than ever before. Everyone would become successful and rich!

My first clue would be to visit a Bit Torrent website. It made music available for free and their business model was to attract as many eyeballs as possible. By doing so, they could sell the advertising real estate around the perimeter of their content.

On one of their pages was my *full* music and video catalogue. At the bottom of the page was a counter, bragging how many illegal downloads had occurred in the past five days. It proudly boasted over five thousand. My mind quickly raced. If this is the volume in the past five days, what about the rest of the days of the year and the number of years they had been doing this? What about the many other sites of its kind? How much were they downloading for *free*?

Now, I don't know what your parents or grandparents told you when you were young, but mine told me nothing is ever really *free*.

As a prominent independent and entrepreneurial artist, in 2010 I would be invited to appear before the Heritage Committee in Ottawa. The committee was charged with examining the state of affairs in the music industry.

In my presentation, I spoke of the eco-system in which I had been involved, since the inception of my career in 1985, and which had been impacted, harmed or simply disappeared in just over a decade. They would include:

Recording studios and their administrative staff and suppliers, engineers, technicians, graphic artists, photographers, make-up artists, mastering companies, duplicators and manufacturers, retailers large and small (such as the now defunct Sam the Record Man) or printers such as the Stratford Beacon Herald. Publicists, travel agents, airlines, musical equipment suppliers, insurance companies, local media, advertising outlets, caterers, merchandisers, lawyers, accountants to name a few...

In May of 2017, financial journalist, Carl Mortished captured the scale of the situation when writing an article for *The Globe and Mail* in which he describes the music industry's collapse as it went from a 20 billion dollar industry in 1999 to a 7.5 billion dollar industry in 2014, primarily as a result of unfettered and unregulated technology.

In time, the industry moved from an era of illegal downloading to a streaming model, where it is now. Where artists who were once paid twenty-five cents per song on vinyl or CD, are now paid less than ten cents per thousand plays on streaming sites such as Google Play and Spotify—*services many consumers currently enjoy.*

The tech industry's motto—"move fast and break things"—seemed to have little or no concern as to the viability of the business model they were *headed for*, nor of the people and the services which contributed to the *value*

the customer would ultimately experience, or the people who would now be out of work.

What was once a people business, soon became a purely transactional one, with anonymous connections with tech companies who would not know me or my customers, and who would reap the rewards of what took the local industry decades to establish and remove that revenue out of the community, and then out of the country.

OTHER INDUSTRIES & MEDIA

Of course, there have been many other industries which have now experienced a similar fate.

Newspaper ad revenues fell from 66 billion in 2000 to 17 billion thanks to the role of Facebook, which became the disseminators of ‘free news’ and more concerning, ‘fake news’. (CBC’ radio’s Sunday Edition *What’s Not to Like about Facebook?*)

<https://www.cbc.ca/radio/thesundayedition/facebook-what-s-not-to-like-an-ira-basen-documentary-1.3446328>

Their business model would be built on the intense harvesting of citizens’ data and selling that on to other third parties, a practice most people do not realize or understand.

<http://www.cbc.ca/radio/thesundayedition/surviving-a-tough-interview-revolutionary-presidential-candidates-facebook-s-rise-to-global-domination-1.3443850/facebook-what-s-not-to-like-an-ira-basen-documentary-1.3445888>

Bricks and mortar retail have been replaced by what is now called the *Amazon Effect*, as we are now invited to order online and have our orders delivered by drones. This kind of approach may be convenient for consumers, and may be what critics consider the ‘cult of efficiencies’, but it does have unintended consequences. These consequences are felt most

severely by producers and small operators who watched their business model morph into something *unsustainable* for them.

I got to thinking of how much emphasis was put on the *consumer* experience and yet how little insight or attention was on the producer. The idea, prevalent at the time was how the consumer was king and the way to hook them was to sell everything on the idea of efficiencies and convenience. “*But what about the producer?*” I had asked myself. If the producer can’t make a living, won’t they cease to produce?

Looking out in the audience gathered here today, I have little doubt that many of you may have faced this same question in your various operations. I were to start out today, there would be no possible way to have achieved the success I have experienced. In fact, I discourage anyone from getting into the music business as there is presently no viable or predictable business model on which to build a career and to sustain yourself or a family. As a result of this lack of viability, music genres are slowly disappearing, like the music we once sang in childhood.

CHILDREN

I became a mother late in life. It has opened my eyes and has allowed me to experience things I would have never experienced before. It has provided me fresh insight into things I may never have taken an interest in. It was something I always wanted to be and feel blessed every day to *be* a mother.

Since opening the Falstaff Family Centre in 2000, I have taken a keen interest in child development and families, and, indeed, it is the subject of children and families which is one of my main focus points as the Honorary Colonel for the Royal Canadian Air Force.

I have spent many hours reading about child development, speaking with a variety of experts, watching documentaries and studying education systems.

It has been fascinating to reflect on the vast changes since my childhood growing up in Morden in the 1960s.

It is true. There are fewer of the older kinds of neighbourhoods, with corner stores, or local schools to which most students can walk. Many families now live in developments which largely rely on the automobile. Children and families are heavily scheduled, and family life has become more fraught and difficult. Sunday dinners together are fewer and fewer. But it is the matter concerning mental health which seems most alarming.

It was just last fall when I was speaking with someone from Stratford Social Services that I learned that children as young as four were talking about suicide. This is a frightening and horrifying development. I also recalled the spate of suicides of the young girls in Woodstock a few years ago. I became so alarmed that I called the local health unit as I wanted to know how many suicides there had been of youth under 18 in Perth County last year. They didn't know and pointed me to seek the answer elsewhere.

I remembered hearing Professor Henry Giroux of McMaster University argue that the very nature of youth, so often spoken of as 'our future', is being changed as they are being "*carpet-bombed with consumer culture.*"

<http://www.cbc.ca/radio/ideas/disposable-youth-1.3036140>

I've often thought about his statement in this age of disruptive technologies, which has equipped us with terms such as 'digital dementia,' and 'nature deficit disorder.' I hear many parents and families lament that they don't know what has hit them or their children.

We all recognize that there are many factors which can come into play in mental health including poverty, education and social or human isolation. But so many of the experts in this field believe technology is playing a disproportionate role in what can only be referred to as human carnage. Perhaps you know someone—it could be children, grandchildren, nieces, nephews who are facing some of these challenges.

Many of these youth have not acquired vital person-to-person communications skills. The nature of their activities is shrouded in the secrecy of the online world and we, as parents, find it hard to keep up.

Being Thirteen <http://www.cnn.com/specials/us/being13>

For adolescent girls, it comes primarily through the instant and perpetual ‘connectedness’ provided by their 24/7 smart phones, often involving texting, sexting, bullying or suicide. For boys, it is reflected in the plummeting of their academic performance as their attraction and addiction to X-boxes, gaming devices grows, offering hours of so-called ‘playtime’ at a screen filled with heavy violent images and hard porn.

(See books *Boys Adrift and Girls on the Edge* by Dr Leonard Sax and *Man Interrupted* by Philip Zimbardo and Nikita Coulombe)

Many parents are scared and puzzled in sorting the good from the bad, or how to understand cause and effect when it comes to such issues as technology, self-esteem & mental health.

I hear experts across a broad spectrum of professions who are speaking out with great concern. They speak of afflictions involving vision, sleep, Type 2 diabetes, attention deficit disorder and endocrine system problems which can determine so much of our human development.

British Dr Arik Sigman states in his 2013 report to the European Union, “*This is not a cultural conversation about how children spend their leisure time*” but rather, “*...screen time has become a medical issue.*”

<https://www.researchgate.net/publication/232222451> *Time for a view on screen time*

<https://www.emfacts.com/2013/05/the-impact-of-screen-media-on-children-a-eurovision-for-parliament/>

Perhaps the most significant and alarming fact is that many of these devices are not only disruptive, but can be *highly addictive*.

<https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2017/oct/05/smartphone-addiction-silicon-valley-dystopia>

Parents are now coming to tech addiction experts such as Dr Nicholas Kardaras for advice concerning young adolescent boys who often sit in diapers for twelve hours or more, sometimes with beany-like containers on their heads, filled with power drinks while they play the latest video game with other gamers around the world. (See book *Glow Kids* by Dr Nicholas Kardaras)

How did this technology come into family life so pervasively? Initially, it came in through the music industry, through iPods and portable devices, which soon morphed into Smartphones, tablets and more.

But there was also a point when the education systems were targeted by tech companies, not unlike the soft-drink companies who used to populate the schools with pop machines as fundraising machinery.

Moreover, the potential upsides of the technology were sold so well that everyone developed the firm belief that *“this was going to be the way of the future, and you don’t want your Johnny or Susie left behind”*.

There was talk about budgetary efficiencies which goes on still, and about a trend to reduce the amount of teacher time by focusing on e-learning.

So, it was in this way that school boards and ministries of education fell victim to this evolution of technology in children’s lives. Hence, they became unintended enablers, implicitly endorsing the disruption of family life as spoken to in a recent Toronto Star article called *“How Google took over the classroom”*.

<http://www.thestar.com/news/world/2017/05/13/how-google-took-over-us-classrooms.html>

But when I began researching technology with respect to education, I would soon discover that the OECD (the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development) released a report in 2018 stating that more technology does not necessarily mean for better learning. No matter how convinced mainstream society was of the benefits of technology at an early age, many Silicon Valley leaders were of a *different* mindset.

<http://www.oecd.org/education/students-computers-and-learning-9789264239555-en.htm>

In the spring of 2017, I came across an article in *Business Insider* in which Bill Gates had declared that he was now of the view that children under the age of 14 should not be allowed to have a smartphone.

<http://www.businessinsider.com/the-safest-age-to-give-your-child-a-smartphone-2017-5>

I was already aware of the 2010 *New York Times* interview with Apple's now deceased CEO, Steve Jobs, when the journalist asked if Steve's children liked the recently released iPad. His reply was short and sweet. "They haven't used it," he admits. "We limit how much technology our kids use at home."

<https://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/11/fashion/steve-jobs-apple-was-a-low-tech-parent.html>

In fact, many Silicon Valley families send their children to tech-less schools such as the Peninsula Waldorf School in Los Altos, California as profiled in a 2011 *New York Times* piece.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2011/10/23/technology/at-waldorf-school-in-silicon-valley-technology-can-wait.html>

The way another article would put it, “*America’s public schools are still promoting devices with screens, even offering digital-only pre-schools, while the rich are banning screens from class altogether*”.

The Digital Gap Between Rich and Poor kids is not what we expected...

<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/26/style/digital-divide-screens-schools.html>

So if **their** children are not on it, why are ours? What do **they** know that we don’t? How long have they known it? Could this be like the tobacco industry trying to convince us that there is no harm in the product? But worse, because unfettered misuse of these technologies can affect our whole being, especially our brains and our mental health?

In fact, investigative journalist Nicholas Carr argues in his book, *The Shallows*, that the premature use, misuse and over use of these technologies is causing the human brain to revert to a pre-printing press physiology and that we are indeed, causing a kind of climate change in our species.

These are but a few of the threats the internet and technology has put on our society. A massive and growing body of critical commentary is emerging on subjects such as surveillance capitalism, data hacking, automation & job loss, ransom ware—as the City of Stratford and my own company experienced this spring—fake news and the harm it is doing to our democracies and privacies.

We are beginning to feel the vulnerability of a society which has put so much (perhaps *too* much) into a system which we are now learning can be so easily weaponised against us. A system which has eliminated so much diversity in its operations and centralised that power in a few privately owned companies which are more powerful than many countries. Most disturbingly, this has come at us so fast, we’ve lost the ability or the will to conduct a truly democratic discussion about the rightful place of these technologies, and people are simply being relegated to being consumers and not citizens.

RONALD WRIGHT: ARCHEAOLGY & HISTORY

When I was in high school, I didn't really connect with history. But over the years, as I pursued the history of the Celts which took me all over the world, I came to realise the vital importance of history, archaeology and anthropology, and looking at the passage of time in large equations.

In his book *A Short history of Progress*, British historian Ronald Wright states “*Archaeology is perhaps the best tool we have for looking ahead because it allows us a deep reading of the direction and momentum of our course through time: what we are, what we have come from; and therefore where we are most likely going*”.

He reflects on how the meaning of the word “progress” has changed over the past couple of centuries, as we have become more fixated on *technological* progress and less on the *moral* progress which should accompany it.

He explores human development and the various civilisations over time, as one might examine the black boxes of aircraft which have gone down. He observes that, we, as a species, have had a propensity to get ourselves into something he calls “progress traps” such as the evolution of weapons as they morphed from Chinese gunpowder to the atomic bomb, at which point he suggests we made a bit too much progress.

Many would argue that we are reaching that tipping point with our current technological revolution, as we enter into the era of automated weapon systems.

<https://www.cbc.ca/radio/ideas/killer-robots-march-into-uncharted-ethical-territory-1.5289804>

Ronald Wright speaks of our first act of progress with unintended consequences, when he talks about the denuding of our landscapes of trees. It was a result of our species “*sticking to entrenched beliefs and practices,*

robbing from the future to pay for the present, spending the last reserves of natural capital on a reckless binge of excess wealth and glory” (page 79). Sounds familiar.

In a recent CBC broadcast, he suggests we may very well be in one of those progress traps now with respect to climate change and so-called “technological progress”, and the stakes are as high as they can get.

<https://www.cbc.ca/radio/ideas/escape-options-narrowing-for-world-caught-in-progress-trap-ronald-wright-1.5288833>

For me, this was the first time I reflected on the rhetorical question,

“Just because we can, should we?”

And I believe it has tremendous relevance for us, today.

We are currently living in a time of at least two existential threats: climate change, and the unintended consequences of technology. Not since the Second World War have we been called to respond to something so significant. How will we respond? Will we sit back and declare that it’s too hard, too complicated, indeed, too mammoth an issue to tackle? Or, will we decide that in order to enjoy the rights and freedoms we so cherish, we have an obligation to answer the call of being better, more involved citizens? Will we turn our back on our children, allow them to become more and more mesmerized by the incessant siren of ever-intrusive technology, or will we hold up a STOP sign and shout "our future is not for sale"?

Like so many of you I, as a small business operator, have never been able to stand on the sidelines and watch the world go by; we wouldn't have survived if we had. Like you, I've had to roll up my sleeves and attack problems head on.

I have been blessed. My career has allowed me to see the world that has so enriched my being, to meet people from all walks of life, to become a

citizen of the world. I am so grateful. But as I stand in front of you today, I find myself being pulled in another direction.

Just as music 'chose me' over forty years ago, I find myself being pulled by these dual threats. To sit back and do nothing, to pretend to be oblivious to all that I see around me, is not in my DNA.

So at this time, I have decided to heed this call and set aside my career for an indefinite period in order to devote my complete energy to this battle. It will be a long and winding road, one with a yet to be determined path. I don't know where or when it will end. What I do know is that it is a fight that must be fought. For our children, their children and for our communities—for our way of life.

Like the brave men and women of our armed forces, we are all foot soldiers in this battle now.

Perhaps I will see some of you along the way.

Thank you.