

Spirits in the Electronic World 0.1

By Cliff Hayden
Charles River Church
June 11, 2006



Introduction

Let's pray. "May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be pleasing to you, O Lord." Amen.

Well, here I am again, talking about a favorite subject that may have spiritual implications. But, first of all, a warning....

The Web world is populated with notes like this, especially in Wikis, indicating that the following content is considered to be opinion, not necessarily fact. So, I warn you, you're getting my view of this subject. Others think differently. You get to decide.

What am I talking about?

So, "Spirits in the Electronic World". What is this about?

Well, it's not about ghosts in the machine, or some new form of spirituality, or going to church on-line.

Instead, I want to explore with you the ways that the Internet is changing: itself and our society. I want to discuss some of the ideas or forces that seem to be behind these changes. Mostly, I want to share with you how I see the movement of the Spirit in the electronic world and show how we can participate.

A brief Internet History of the Web

It is amazing to think that a mere 25 years ago, there was no such thing as the Internet and now it connects over 1/6 of the world population. There are over 70 million unique domain names and over 12 billion Web pages out there now. How did it all happen?

As we all know, the Internet was invented by Al Gore during his service in the US Congress. Ok, not really. He did have a lot to do with *funding* its expansion throughout his career, but it was created in the early 1980's by the National Science Foundation to improve communication between research facilities. A few years later it was opened to commercial concerns.

In 1991, CERN, a research institute on the France / Switzerland border, publicized a new technology, called HTML and HTTP, the building blocks of the World Wide Web. This technology created a whole new way to publish and manage information. The big deal was the use of hypertext linking – that underlined, blue text that sends us to a referenced article. In what seems like no time at all, the Web flowered and grew into an enormously popular source for up-to-date information in context.

As soon as the Web was able to handle secure commerce, and the Internet boom was on. Commercial interests dominated growth in the following years with electronic stores and auction sites. Personal publishing was still pretty much limited to static HTML which was hard to program in directly, so it became a side issue to the "real business" of the Internet, which was commerce. This could be described as Web 1.0, a time when big organizations were the providers of content and individuals were viewed primarily as content consumers.

To me, what is interesting about this story is that the Web has retained its philosophical roots despite all the commercialization. These roots include:

- A desire to share information and learning.
- A belief that more contributors to the pool of knowledge are better than few.
- A dispersed leadership model based on merit.

These roots are best understood in the context of open source – programs that their creators give away for free. The heart of the Internet is written in open source, things like our mail and Web servers and other bits that help us find other machines. Here's how open source works:

- A good idea is born inside a programmer's head.
- The programmer creates a halfway ok version and publicizes it on the Internet and invites others to make suggestions and maybe even take a hand in sprucing it up a bit.
- People jump in, the most productive ones become fast friends and colleagues, and some really cool software gets written. More people jump in and a whole ecology of sub-projects pop up.
- Nobody gets paid for their work.

This seems like a totally impossible way for anything useful to get done, but the fastest growing operating system on the planet was developed by Linus Torvalds just this way. It's called Linux.

The philosophy of open source is really built around the idea of mutual benefit, a reliance on others to refine our work, and a flexible leadership model based on merit. This pattern of mutuality, collaboration, and merit recognition is repeated throughout the history of the Internet.

So why is the Web back in the news?

Newsweek had the Internet back on its front cover a few weeks ago, talking about the Live Internet, another term for Web 2.0, a whole family of technologies that take the core philosophy of the Internet to a whole new level. Things like:

- Weblogs – ('Blogs', for short) These are sites and tools that simplify the process of Web publication to the level of a word processor. They have built-in capability for linking in other blogs and tracking when a post has been linked. The collection of interconnected weblogs is called the blogosphere. What odd words we come up with.
- Wikis – The name is based on "What I Know Is...". These are on-line, editable encyclopedias created and maintained by the people who use them. The most popular is Wikipedia, and in some areas it matches the latest Encyclopedia Britannica for accuracy – even though it is a completely voluntary effort. Every article is undergoing continual revision and editing – all by volunteers.
- Folksonomies – these tools enable users to assign their own tags to information they find interesting or important on the Web. Keyword searches within these tools show items that have been tagged by the most people first, thus creating a new kind of search engine that uses our mental filters in the mix. A popular example of this is del.icio.us.
- Social Networking – a combination of the above to create a whole social interaction environment. Users are invited to find and link their friends and then navigate through those links to see *their* friends. MySpace is the hot-spot for the younger set in this regard. It allows each user to create a whole site for themselves with a personal profile, blog entries, pictures, music and links to friends. LinkedIn.com is a site that is focused on professional networking.
- Public Betas – nearly all of the sites I have mentioned are opened to the public before the site is really done being constructed. The users are then invited to offer their comments on how the site works, what other features would be nice to have, and so on. The programmers incorporate those suggestions at a very fast pace, get new feedback and do it again. Flickr.com is famous for this behavior. This gaming site turned into a picture sharing site and has been updated and changed on a daily basis virtually since its inception. This kind of responsiveness defines the goal for programming in this new era.
- RSS – Really Simple Subscription – a protocol that allows sites to provide a subscription service so that users can put their own 'face' on the content being supplied. Practically speaking, this allows people to track a bunch of sites in one place, rather than polling them one by one. It also leads to mashups.
- Mashups – When Google made their mapping application, they took it a step further than their rivals, not just because the user experience was so cool (The first time I panned around in Google Maps, I couldn't believe my eyes!), but because they found a way to tie their entire search engine into the mapping tool. So you can say I want to find Chicken Tikka Masala in Needham and get a map to the nearest Indian restaurant! But they didn't stop there. They published the interface to their mapping software, so everyone else can use it that way too. After Katrina a group of IBMers slammed together a site that enabled people to find each other and share news using Google's map. And they did it in *two days*. This notion of sharing components freely is revolutionizing the speed at which powerful applications are being released on the Web.

Note that the philosophy behind these tools is pretty much the same as it always has been for the Internet:

- The desire to share ideas and knowledge
- A trust in the 'wisdom of the crowd'
- Dynamic models of leadership based on contribution and usage.

The Hype

Newsweek refers to this new Internet technology as the Live Web.

Live because everything is happening is near-real time. (Did I mention that Wikipedia users published the first images and stories about the London bombings? They scooped the professional media by hours.)

Live in the sense that its growth model is organic and emergent rather than planned.

Live in the sense that it is everyone's stage.

Here's how Newsweek put it:

"Less than a decade ago, when we were first getting used to the idea of an Internet, people described the act of going online as venturing into some foreign realm called cyberspace. But that metaphor no longer applies. MySpace, Flickr and all the other newcomers aren't places to go, but things to do, ways to express yourself, means to connect with others and extend your own horizons. Cyberspace was somewhere else. The Web is where we live."

(Copyright Newsweek, 2006)

It's all very hopeful and wonderful, eh? There ought to be some caveats, however – this place we live is not exactly a panacea:

Web 2.0 features use of the "Wisdom of the crowd" – the notion that in certain circumstances a group of people can be smarter than the smartest person among them. This was exemplified by the results on *Who Wants to be a Millionaire* – contestant's personal friend lifelines were only about 70% right, but the audience was more like 90% right. **But** is everything that involves a group of people sharing information on the Web representative of this model? We all know about the madness of the mob. Besides, there are many areas in which a little expertise may go a long way. Personally, I have no desire to submit my symptoms on a blog and get a diagnosis via commentary!

The idea on the Live Web is that the barriers for self expression before a world-wide audience have never been lower. Blogging, Flickr, YouTube (which is Flickr for movies), Social networking – the opportunities are endless, and all very easy to use. **But** not everyone is really in the game to express them selves are they? Some are predators on others' vulnerability or are there to sell us something.

The story of my research

Since I agreed to give this talk, I have been looking to find the intersections between my faith and my interest in these developments. I started subscribing to blogs that caught my eye. The blogs I picked fit a pattern of interests – explicitly or implicitly Christian, thought-provoking and a little edgy, geeky/spiritual mixes, and emergent church stuff.

One site in particular got to me almost immediately. It's called Addison Road. I encountered this group blog site during Holy Week and I was impressed with their authenticity as they wrestled with the story of the Passion. As I read their posts, their world became a part of mine. That is the odd thing about blogs. Reading others' blogs brings their world into your life. Their ideas influence your thinking. Their story becomes enmeshed with your own. This is a powerful reason for us to blog – so that we can share our stories (and God's story in ours) with those who read. We can become partners, mentors, and protégés as we authentically tell about our struggles, ideas, pains, and joys.

Through their site, I was led to another, called Real Live Preacher (RLP). The first post I read there nearly brought me to tears. He wrote about his vision of bringing all of the people who subscribe to his blog together into a hall for a celebration of an "open communion". He offers his story of how food and longing for home come together then says:

"So many of us have lost our sense of home over the years. Others never had a home to speak of. And that is why I say that we have journeyed long and far to be here together tonight. For those of us who

are Christians, the bread and wine are symbols of something old and rich and meaningful. The bread nourishes more than our bodies, and the wine loosens more than our tongues. This meal is a celebration of the redemption we have always hoped for, always sought, and desperately needed to find. We consider ourselves to be a family in this faith.

Those of you who are not a part of our spiritual tradition are nonetheless welcome at these tables. The bread is freshly baked. The wine is rich and heady. As you share in this meal that means so much to us, perhaps you will tell us of your own journey to find meaning and to find your place in the world.

Laugh and talk and drink and be loved. Feel at home here, for the food is good and you are among friends. Eat as much as you want. Stay as long as you like. I'll turn out the lights when everyone is gone.

That's all."

[Ok, he may be taking the notion of 'Open' a bit far, but he has an interesting idea about hospitality, don't you think?] He closes his vision by leaving the stage and disappearing into the crowd, becoming a part of the celebration.

'Then, when no one was left and all you could hear were the crickets, one small man would turn out the lights, lock the door, and walk alone into the parking lot. He would turn his face toward his beloved stars, wipe the tears from his eyes, and say, "We did this; and we remembered You."

I subscribed immediately – writing like this is a rare find and I want to read more of it in the hope that mine will improve.

On another tack, the Emergent Us site is one of those useful blogs that is mainly there to create links to other sites. Through it, I found a great discussion of how we can talk about truth in a postmodern context. There is a lot of controversy about this between the traditional Evangelical Church and some leaders of the Emergent Church – probably because the Emergent Church is still trying to work out a Christian approach to addressing the issues that postmodernists bring up. What struck me most, however, was their concerted effort to keep the discussion respectful. They showed admirable restraint and courage as they wrestled with an important issue for the Church. I want to track down more material on this front and link it into my blog.

On that subject, I have to note that somewhere along the way I realized that I had to join this conversation not just as a commenter on other blogs, but also as an author. So I started a blog of my own – Lines Off the Cliff. It's very short (5 posts), but I hope it will be useful. I treat it as a place for me to try out ideas and thoughts. Like open software or perpetual betas, I expect to be told that I am off the wall sometimes and encouraged others. Please, oh, please check it out and comment on anything good or bad. It's still pretty primitive, but I'm committed to this new spiritual discipline.

Spiritual discipline, you say? Oh, yeah. I didn't get to that part. Several bloggers wrote about how their walk with Christ has been influenced by their blogging. It seems to function much like journaling or the practice of writing regular letters to a distant, close friend. Blogging, taken seriously, forces the author to be introspective and to reflect upon the world around them. I found this particularly true for me when I was heading back from Boca Raton. I said to myself, "I gotta blog this – what should I say?" I started out thinking about how wonderful all the service was and the great food and the entertainment ... and then it hit me, "Wow. This is weird. As the week went on, I became more sensitive the little things that didn't go perfectly. I wonder if that is why some powerful people seem to turn into monsters at the slightest hitch. I think I'd better explore that a bit." In the end, I realized that I also can behave badly when I get the chance. If I hadn't been thinking about writing, I don't think I would have ever gone there.

Recently, the Real Live Preacher linked out to friend of his who just started blogging her poetry. I like her work so I stated watching her blog, too. One day, she posted the simple question, "Where does it hurt?" For each response, she wrote a prayer back, effusing love and care to those who reported their pain. I was really touched by her willingness to listen and care. This approach may not be everyone's cup of tea, but it shows another pattern on the Web – community building. There are practical limits without physical presence, but several bloggers reported receiving tremendous support from their readers when they reported a crisis in their lives.

What is the Spirit doing?

Now that I have told my story, I can share some ideas about how I see the Spirit moving here:

- There is a strong linkage between the Emergent Church and the Web. Perhaps this is because so many of them are populated with an age group that uses the Web as a place to be. I believe that the leaders see this as their calling and live on the Web as if it were a mission field.
- God is blessing the work of the bloggers in their own lives and the lives of others. This is clear from their accounts and the accounts of their readers. Churches have been formed because like minded people were able to meet each other through the Web.
- Christian discourse is migrating from the printed page to the electronic medium. Important work in developing a response to current societal forces is being done where we can all see it and, if we care to, participate. Even watching this process can be a blessing.

What do we do about all this?

I think we should get involved. Here are some ideas:

- Spend a small amount of your day reading online. Maybe 15 minutes. Find a couple (or more) blogs that tend to have challenging or interesting stuff (to you) and start tracking them. I bet you'll be amazed how quickly you find yourself relating to the authors and learning from them.
- If you feel called, start a blog yourself. It could just be a private journal or you can share it with the world – your choice. You can even limit who sees your blog if you go to the right service.
- Those who do a lot of Net research, please use the tagging tools and share your links so we can all benefit from your hard work.

There are risks that we do need to address, however. The first of these is personal security. This medium plays host not only to the wonderful people I have mentioned, but also to predators, liars, and thieves. We have to be careful to follow safe practices or we can find ourselves or our families being victimized:

- Don't share personal information. Kids should not share last name, no one should share phone numbers, home addresses or information that could be used to steal identity (Social Security Number, mother's maiden name, etc.). Be careful with pictures – they can be very revealing if you aren't careful.
- Make sure that the blog provider has password protected accounts and put a non-trivial password on any account you create. Break-ins reveal everything you put in your profile, which may well be more than you want to share – plus they generally will want to violate your work in some fashion and who needs that?
- We have to be very thoughtful about how we talk about our families. Think in terms of how you would feel about a complete stranger reading what you are writing. Then think about how your loved ones will feel about a complete stranger reading what you say about them. Self revelation is risky, and you may decide to go there – do not take others with you.
- Assume that anything you publish is permanent. Don't assume that you can retract it tomorrow.
- Parents – review your children's sites with them regularly to make sure that they are appropriate and safe. At the outset screen new content before it is posted until you are certain that they have ingrained the security rules.

The second one is time. This sermon was twice as hard to write as the last, because the Web is so darned interesting. Everything from the Monkey Chow Diary to a long video of amazing Rube Goldberg machines kept me entranced when I should probably have been reading more pithy content. The best plan here is to budget your on-line time and get through the real stuff before you start playing.

In all, this has been a great ride. I've learned a ton and have been changed into a blogger (see <http://linesoffthecliff.blogspot.com>). (Yikes!) I close this talk with the URL of my del.icio.us account which links in the resources I used on this talk – and a bunch I didn't <http://del.icio.us/kratira/sermon> May God bless us as we pursue his Kingdom, even on the Internet.