



“Hearth”

by Bill McKibben

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Living in the north, in the woods, I’ve of course spent much of my life in front of an actual hearth, or at least a woodstove. For decades it was the main way of heating our house, and my body clock reset to the point where I’d wake at three in the morning to stoke the fire as easily as a mother to nurse. Every night from October to April finds us in the few dozen square feet in front of the stove, our house collapsed into that narrow envelope of warmth. The dog can sit for hours looking into the flames: the “fire channel,” we call it.

But honesty requires me to say that in recent years we haven’t really inhabited that space. We’ve been there physically, but we’ve been staring into the small portable hearths resting on our laps, staring into the mesmerizing blaze of light that now entralls people everywhere. Entralls them, or at least my wife and me, more powerfully than the TV ever did. Television we happily did without—its din and clamor easily enough forgotten the minute you stepped away. But this? Not so easily avoided.

To say that the Internet—something that did not really exist till my life was half over—is now where many of our lives are lived is almost an understatement. Twitter is the center of our political life, Facebook the replacement for the newspaper and the newscast, and Amazon where we go to shop. Spotify offers a catalogue of every vaguely musical sound emitted everywhere on earth, yours for ten dollars monthly; Wikipedia delivers a roughly reliable guide to our collective knowledge. I’ve spent the last decade helping organize a global grassroots movement to fight climate change, and we literally could not have done it before the Internet. We live in a nation governed now by someone who could not have been elected before the Internet’s advent. But no need here to tally all the Internet’s terrors. Suffice to say that the Internet is now our collective hearth, the place where our species addictively turns. We tilt toward the screen the way plants twist toward the sun. Orthopedists report that our characteristic posture has shifted from all that staring downward, bringing us new aches and pains. If we were the ape that walked upright, we’re now the ape that looks at its palm most of the time.

So let us think not about the manifestations good and bad of this technology but instead about the basic nature of this new world we inhabit, and compare it to the hearth around which we’ve gathered since the start of things.

Life on the Internet means two opposing realities. One, the bedrock solipsism of the experience. This is for you, and only you. You follow your own series of clicks down your own warren of trails, a path no one else will ever follow exactly. You’ve shaped your own feeds to reflect your own beliefs and persuasions, and hence they now reflect that back at you. Even the TV was a river with relatively few channels—three, in my youth. There was unavoidable sharing and overlap. But the Internet is a delta with endless braided rivulets and streams. You are by yourself.

And yet you are also never alone, never unoccupied. The clicking never ceases—I follow nine hundred people on Twitter, which means that never more than a few seconds elapses before some new idea pops up on the screen. One never reaches Facebook only to find a notice saying



“nothing interesting has happened.” There’s always more. And our brains seem to crave that endless flow of novelty—not looking at the unread email in your inbox is at least as hard as not eating from the open box of chocolates in the pantry. Stimulus, reward, dopamine, something something—that’s how it seems to work.

My fear is that we’re losing—that I’m losing—the two crucial things the hearth, or the campfire before it, provided. The first is commonality, the shared community built by the gathering of several souls in the same place. Think about the creation stories passed down by millennia of oral repetition. Or think of the gossip exchanged nightly. Both served to ground us in particular communities, instead of the literal nowhere we now spend our time. There’s still plenty of gossip, but it’s about the worlds we don’t actually inhabit. We are truly by ourselves, and for a socially evolved primate that is a strange experience; it wasn’t that many generations ago that we were sitting on the warm savanna grass and picking lice out of each other’s fur. The closest we’ve got now is the movement when something goes viral, and for a moment there’s a connection between us, until the next click kills it.

But at the same time, we’re never alone. At night, when the fire dwindled, the talk did too. People drifted toward sleep, or into their thoughts. Throughout human history, one of the characteristic experiences of *Homo sapiens* has been to stare into the dying embers, one’s mind wandering. But that, I think, rarely happens anymore. There’s something to fill every moment, something new and different even if it’s essentially the same.

All this is a way of saying: thinking consciously about the hearth—about those places and activities that center us in community and also in our own minds—is now crucial in a way it’s never been before. I miss, a great deal, those experiences that have always marked our lives, and there are times when I feel as if I’m living inside an experiment, an experiment going wrong. That’s why this book is important. If we’re to keep the chain of deep human contact intact, we need to actively seek out those experiences. For most of human history, rattling on about community and about focus would have been like having a considered opinion on breathing, or offering advice on bipedal locomotion. But all of a sudden our default is in the opposite direction. The Internet, whatever its other vices and virtues, is an anti-hearth, and it is winning. Where our time is spent, there also is our heart.