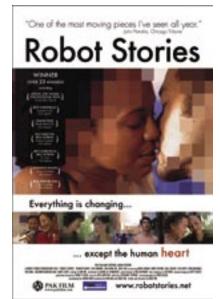by Ravi Chandra, MD | photos courtesy of Greg Pak

Tech Troubles:
Interfacing on the New Frontier

've had several friends, patients and colleagues come to me with their technological woes. Anyone who's ever had a computer crash or difficulties getting their Palm to talk to their desktop has an instant taste of what it's like to be tethered to a digital device: suddenly all-too-dependent and filled with frustration. Many of us wouldn't be able to get our work done without these devices, and when they go on the fritz, our worlds turn upside down.

Technology is clearly a medium for human relationships, for better and worse. On the one hand, we can communicate instantly with those far away. On the other hand, people far away might find out instantly how we feel about them, and not appreciate it. The send key should come with a safety lock, judging by all the problems I've seen "accidental" or hastily sent emails cause. One person regularly gets into fights with a partner over IM (Instant Messaging). What starts out as casual, downtime sweet talk turns into misunderstandings and angry replies in ALL CAPS. By the end of the day, they're furious with each other, without having spoken a single word to each other. Days or weeks elapse before they are ready to reconcile. Okay, so maybe the problem isn't the IM, but it certainly doesn't help. Not being able to read the sender's body language, tone of voice and facial expression can lead to disastrous misunderstandings.

A friend described sending an innocuous email to a relative, simply stating that he had decided not to remodel his garage as the relative had suggested. The relative assumed he was insulting him and

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"One of the most moving pieces I've seen all year."
John Petrakis, Chicago Tribune

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fired off several angry replies that caught my friend completely off guard. It took a long time, more emails and several phone calls before they were able to reconcile. Another man is somewhat socially avoidant, and does most of his interpersonal communicating on Bulletin Boards and in Chat Rooms. Flames, which are fiery attacks on other chat participants, are the norm at many of these websites. Unfortunately, he takes them far too seriously, and returns the flames, even seeking out chats with people who would obviously disagree with him (for example, expressing anti-war views on a pro-war website). This obviously skews his understanding of how relationships and even conversations work, and put him at a disadvantage in real-world communications. As a result, he stays isolated.

Online dating is an example of a very "high touch" (meaning human, or personal) task (meeting people) being reduced to high tech. Instead of meeting people in person, and getting to know them, you form instant opinions of like or dislike based on a digital photo and a few words. Perhaps it's a good way of "finding out what's out there" and trying out relationships. Maybe comparison-shopping can be a good way to work out what you really want and value in relationships. But there are certain qualities of the online experience that are troubling. Superficial criteria (like height, weight and skin color) often

win out over balanced appreciation of a person's attributes. Women are just as guilty of this as men, contrary to popular belief. Also, when the online dater runs into imperfections in a potential partner, he or she is more likely to dump them and go back to fish in the personals. What would be minor considerations in a face-to-face meeting become deal breakers during the email back and forth. People search for elusive "chemistry" and are surprised to find that it doesn't happen while staring at a computer screen. Or perhaps the potential partner does have email chemistry—he or she is still "too short or too fat," so why bother meeting them? It's all too easy to find a new suitor. The flavor of relationships can become transient and skin deep, misshaping one's expectations about what relationships should be all about, what they have been about for countless thousands of years.

The recent independent film *Robot Stories* (directed by Greg Pak and starring Tamlyn Tomita and Sab Shimono among others) explored the impact of technology on relationships in four wonderful short stories. In "Robot Baby", a couple has to care for a small robot to prove they have what it takes to adopt a real baby. Even technology attains the power to evoke strong maternal emotions. "Robot Fixer" portrays a mother's attempt to reconnect with her dying son through his favorite robot toys. They become symbols of what was lost in childhood, what she mourns now. The third film, "Robot Worker" shows android workers breaking through their programs and falling in love, in contrast to their abusive and demeaning human bosses. The final film, "Clay" was my favorite. A dying artist struggles over whether or not he should "upload" his consciousness into a vast computer memory, and thus be able to continue his work. Would he still be living life? What does life mean when such powerful technology can contain a mind? The shorts are all poignant and refreshing, and I highly recommend *Robot Stories* as thought-provoking entertainment. It was a bit on the rosy side, full of hope and promise, but that is a welcome relief from the usual sci-fi film in which humans are enslaved or under attack by technology (*The Matrix*, *I Robot*, *Terminator*, etc).

On the other hand, don't write off enslavement just yet. Some very prominent computer scientists have been shouting "fire" in the last few years, and their warnings may prove to be on target. Bill Joy, Chief Scientist at Sun Microsystems, took on the leadership of this cause with an article in the April, 2000 issue of Wired. Cheerily titled "Why the Future Doesn't Need Us," he goes on to describe how "robotics, genetic engineering and nano-tech are threatening to make humans an endangered species." It is a meandering article, over 11,000 words long, which is most notable considering who wrote it:

from top:
Marcia (Tamlyn Tomita) searches her dark apartment for her malfunctioning robot baby. From the "My Robot Baby" segment of the feature film "Robot Stories." Photo by Wesley Law

Android office worker Lydia (Jullienne Hanzelka Kim) suffers from human gropers. From the "Machine Love" segment of the feature film "Robot Stories"

John Lee (Sab Shimono). From the "Clay" segment of the feature film "Robot Stories." Photo by Wesley Law

one of the preeminent technologists and futurists of our time. If this proponent of technology is ringing the alarm bell, perhaps more people should pay attention. The essence of his argument is that as technology gets better, faster and smaller, it will take over decision-making powers from us. We will become dependent. Then it will attain consciousness and the ability to self-replicate, and effectively out-compete us. Just as bad, nanotechnology (extremely small robots) may overwhelm the biosphere, crowding out lesser forms of life, plants and humans included. This is from somebody who loves technology, whose whole life has been spent improving technology. Bill Joy does not sound so joyful about technology anymore.

As for me, I love my computer and digital devices. I can do so much more now than I could a few years ago. I can share digital photos with friends I haven't seen in years. I can stay in touch with more people more easily. My work flows much better. But the flip side is that for many people, it is easy to get wrapped up in the digital world. Megapixels can't buy you love, as they say. We are still human, and we still need human contact. A smile, a hug, a reassuring pat on the back. Your Playstation can't give you any of these. We still live in a world of great needs and vast separations between rich and poor. The tsunami certainly reminded us of that. Technology brought the images to us, and technology made it easier to donate, but it was the warmth and connectedness of the human heart that allowed some good to come out of tragedy. Maybe it's my professional opinion, or maybe it's my sentiment, but I feel sure that whatever keeps our hearts open, our hands connected, our minds dreaming—will allow us to make appropriate use of technology, and figure out ways of not being overwhelmed by it. Ultimately, it's not more important than us. ∩

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