

## YOUR TURN

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Toward the end of last year, I attended a meeting at the Council on Foreign Relations convened to discuss what to worry about in 2019. The top worry that emerged was cyber-terrorism. Partially as a result, my wife Holly and I deployed a range of defenses in our own cyber-lives: changing passwords, establishing two-factor authentication, and freezing our credit reports.

I also began using a VPN, or virtual private network, when connecting to the Internet, especially when traveling. This provides an added level of security, but it also prevents websites from identifying me until after I log in. As a result, some websites initially treat me as a potential cyber-threat, which is why I spend more time than I would like proving that I am not a robot. This typically involves navigating a captcha — clicking on traffic lights, fire hydrants, storefronts, and bicycles. Evidently, the main difference between a cyber-crime computer and me is that I can tell a fire hydrant from a bicycle. It strikes me as ironic that staying digitally secure in the modern world involves skills I learned in kindergarten.

My view of captchas changed, however, when I listened to a podcast conversation between Sam Harris and the highly successful Silicon Valley tech investor Roger McNamee. The main topic of the episode was McNamee's new book titled, *Zucked: Waking Up to the Facebook Catastrophe*. McNamee explains how Facebook and Google, among others, aggregate information about users in order to create what is essentially a high-resolution digital avatar — an emotional and economic representation — of each user. Facebook and Google then sell access to this avatar to a wide variety of companies, who use it to influence our choices in ways that we are not aware of. In so doing, McNamee says, they take our agency away.

By now, we all know that ads get targeted to our interests and newsfeeds get curated to reinforce our opinions. But there's another level of influence that's even more troubling.

Somewhere in the cloud there is presumably a log of every captcha I have ever completed. It probably reveals how long it took me to complete the captcha and may eventually also record how quickly I moved my mouse and how deftly I navigated from one square to another. Let's say that at some point it takes me longer to complete captchas, and my mouse movement becomes slower than it used to be, and more wobbly. This may be the first indication that I have a disease like, for example, Parkinson's.

Whichever company captures this information, McNamee says, is under no obligation to tell me about this possibility, nor are they under any obligation to keep it

private. They are free to sell it to the highest bidder, most likely my insurance company, which would almost certainly raise my rates or even cut off my coverage. In surveillance capitalism, McNamee concludes, people like you and me aren't so much the customers or even the products, but rather the fuel — the reservoirs of data on which the system runs.

In theory, our way of life in the West is determined by the freely-made choices of individuals within it — economic choices, political choices, and even spiritual choices, among others. When a Christian monk named Martin Luther fomented what eventually became known as the Protestant Reformation in the early 16<sup>th</sup> century, his primary claim was that salvation is an individual matter, not an institutional one. Over the following decades and centuries, the idea that individuals matter more than anything else caught on like wildfire. If you extend the primacy of the individual to politics, you get democracy. If you extend it to economics, you get free enterprise. Both focus on the individual — the desire of individuals to be self-governing and self-sustaining.

In other words, what Luther did for religion, the US Constitution did for politics, and free enterprise did for economics. In many other domains of life today, our roles are also freely self-determined: what we study in school, what we do for a living, with whom we develop intimate relationships, whether or not we have children, what we do with our leisure time, and so on. In each case, whether and how we fill these roles is supposedly a matter for us as individuals to decide.

Within this context, the rise of surveillance capitalism poses a disturbing moral question. The question isn't whether you can have what you want as a consumer, or voter, or spiritual seeker. Rather, it's who gets to decide what you want and how you come to want it.

I recently came across a poem by the writer and jazz singer Peter Cherches. It's titled "Lift Your Right Arm."

Lift your right arm, she said.  
I lifted my right arm.  
Lift your left arm, she said.  
I lifted my left arm. Both of my arms were up.  
Put down your right arm, she said.  
I put it down.  
Put down your left arm, she said.  
I did.  
Lift your right arm, she said.  
I obeyed.  
Put down your right arm.  
I did.  
Lift your left arm.  
I lifted it.

Put down your left arm.

I did.

Silence. I stood there, both arms down, waiting for her next command. After a while I got impatient and said, what next.

Now it's your turn to give the orders, she said.

All right, I said. Tell me to lift my right arm.

The Western tradition of liberalism is based on the transformative idea that it's your turn as an individual to give the orders. It's your turn to decide what to believe. It's your turn to decide who should govern our common life. It's your turn to decide what to buy. It's your turn to decide whom to love, where to live, what work to do. It's your turn.

Surveillance capitalism negates this principle without anyone knowing it's even being challenged. In this sense, the insidious spread today of authoritarian politics, surveillance capitalism, and extremist religion is of a piece. In effect, we think we are making decisions, when in fact we are being served up orders. Through our digital avatars, we are inadvertently inviting Facebook, Google, Amazon, and others to tell us whom we should elevate in the voting booth and whom we should denigrate in the city square. We're inviting them to tell us what we should wear to be fashionable and how we should act to be likable. We're inviting them to tell us what to believe so we have an identity and how to live so we have a community.

Today in our worship here at All Souls, we celebrate two of our young people as they complete our coming-of-age course by presenting their credo statements. In so doing, they demonstrate that the Unitarian Universalist approach to faith and life is neither naïvely individualist nor blindly conformist. Rather, it's a way of living and believing that recognizes that life is fundamentally a reciprocal endeavor. We can't find meaning on our own, nor can we find it if we are ultimately controlled by an algorithm, even an artificially intelligent one. We need others to help us — to remind us that we are not self-reliant and self-sufficient, and also to remind us that we cannot face the difficulties and dangers of life alone.

I recall a story from the Hebrew Bible in which the people of Israel were attacked by a band of marauders while traversing the desert. The prophet Moses went up on top of a hill and held aloft the staff of God, while others went out to do battle. As long as Moses held up his arms, the story goes, the Israelite fighters prevailed. When he tired and his arms dropped down, the marauders would prevail.

Sensing the peril, two men took a large stone to Moses so he could sit down. Then each man took one of Moses' arms, and together they held them aloft until the sun went down. In this way, the story concludes, the Israelites were able to prevail.

No matter what you lift up your arms to do in life, you're going to need other people around you. These are perilous times, but together we can fight against principalities that would coerce us and powers that would co-opt us. Together, we can reclaim both our individual agency and our collective responsibility.

We can also remind each other to respond in gratitude for all we have been given. Life may indeed be perilous, but it's also wondrous. Human beings may be devious and self-serving at times, but we can also be amazingly altruistic, achieving discoveries and advances that make life far better for everyone. Celebrate what's good, but keep an eye peeled for what's not. Stay humble, but also keep a sense of humor.

The next time a captcha shows up on your computer screen, you might think of completing it slowly and sloppily, with your mouse moving erratically like a one-year-old. The time after that, you might complete it with great deliberation, clicking one square every 15 seconds. The artificial intelligence behind the captcha might not get the joke, but at least you will know that you are wise to what's happening.

After all, it's your turn.