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Noreen L. Herzfeld

College of Saint Benedict/Saint John's University, nherzfeld@csbsju.edu

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Black Friday to Cyber Monday: On Climate Change, Computers, and Our Embodied Selves

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On Black Friday, the busiest shopping day of the year, the Trump administration issued a massive new report on climate change, the [National Climate Assessment](#), compiled by thirteen federal agencies. The report clearly states that climate change is an intensifying danger, not just to the landscape of the US, as evinced by the recent [Camp Fire](#) in California, but also to our overall economy and infrastructure. Donald Trump's assessment of the report was [blunt](#): "I don't believe it."

While Trump might be an outlier, I fear he is not. My reasoning is connected to another post-Thanksgiving tradition, [Cyber Monday](#). Cyber Monday represents the trend away from physically shopping at “brick and mortar” stores toward shopping on-line. With computer technology many activities that once took place in real space now take place in the bodiless world of cyberspace: we communicate via messenger and text, we shop, bank and do research on the internet, we amuse ourselves with video games and streamed videos. We project our minds across vast distances or into fictional realms and have experiences in those places that form us as persons. In cyberspace we don’t need bodies; we conceive of ourselves as pure mind. Silicon Valley types speculate that computers could bring us the ultimate “biohack”—to live without any “wetware” at all by uploading our minds to the computer.



Camp Fire burning in California.

Of course, this last option is still only a dream, despite predictions by futurists such as Ray Kurzweil that we will be able to upload our minds into computers by 2045. Kurzweil [writes](#):

“Up until now, our mortality was tied to the longevity of our hardware. When the

hardware crashed, that was it. For many of our forebears, the hardware gradually deteriorated before it disintegrated . . . As we cross the divide to instantiate ourselves into our computational technology, our identity will be based on our evolving mind file. We will be software, not hardware . . . As software, our mortality will no longer be dependent on the survival of the computing circuitry . . . [as] we periodically port ourselves to the latest, evermore capable “personal” computer . . . Our immortality will be a matter of being sufficiently careful to make frequent backups.”

Well, not quite yet. We are embodied creatures. In a recent interview with *Christianity Today* editor Douglas Estes, I make a case for our remaining embodied creatures, at least so long as

we wish to remain human. Yet, as Estes notes, while “movement toward cyborg (cybernetic organism) applications sounds like a leap into dystopian science fiction, Businessman Elon Musk aims to [connect the brain to computers](#), and one neurologist was even willing to [hack his own brain](#) to further research on human speech, hoping to one day attain life extension itself.”

I doubt that we need fear such a future, for several reasons. Here is a part of my response:

One reason it's not going to work is due to the complexity of the brain and the entire human being. There are [projects to map the connectome of the brain](#). The idea is that if we can do the human genome, then why can't we do the connectome? But the connectome of the brain is much more complex than the human



genome. We have billions of neurons, and each of those neurons can possibly be connected to thousands of other neurons. Plus, these connections are plastic; they change. We kill neurons off, we grow new neurons, we reconnect, we end connections that are not being used, and we build new connections in other places. Plus, we're now finding out that we've got an awful lot of neurons in our gut as well. There's a strong connection between the brain and the gut, and it's not one way—brain to gut; gut to brain is connected as well.

You can find the entire interview, “Your Brain is Not a Computer,” at <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2018/november-web-only/cybernetics.html>

What I do fear is that our movement toward the on-line world, epitomized by the move from Black Friday to Cyber Monday, deadens us to our surroundings by making the natural world less salient to our everyday lives. As Richard Louv writes in *Last Child in the Woods*, “Passion is lifted from the earth itself by the muddy hands of the young; it travels along grass-stained sleeves to the heart. If we are going to save environmentalism and the environment, we must also save an endangered indicator species: the child in nature.” I hope the National Climate Assessment will help us all to recognize our embeddedness in both our body and the nature that surrounds us and awake to such a passion. I fear, however, that, like our president, too few of us will look away from our screens to do so.

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