

ESSAY

'Selfie' culture turns people into prisoners

BY GALEN GUENGERICH

The 2013 word of the year, according to the Oxford Dictionaries, was "selfie," which Oxford defines as "a photograph that one has taken of oneself, typically one taken with a smartphone or webcam and uploaded to a social media website." The first use of the term, according to Oxford, occurred when a young Australian got drunk at a friend's 21st birthday party and fell down the stairs. He hit lip-first and his front teeth punched a hole in his bottom lip. His response was to take a photo of himself and post it online for his friends to see. "Sorry about the focus," he wrote, "It was a selfie."

That was more than a decade ago. The word languished in relative obscurity until two years ago, when "selfie" began its climb to digital stardom. With use of the word up 17,000 percent in 2013 alone, Oxford officially gave selfie its rightful place in the dictionary.

This moment in dictionary his-

tory may also represent the culmination of the smartphone's development — the time when its transcendent purpose becomes clear. With smartphone in hand, we can now share with others how our narcissism looks to us. In this sense, the selfie chronicles a counter-Copernican revolution. Increasingly, everything once again revolves around us, but now individually. This is not just the year of the selfie; this is the age of the selfie.

Although their self-view may look good to people who post a lot of selfies, it turns out that their friends often aren't amused. Recent research conducted by Heriot-Watt University in Edinburgh, Scotland, concluded that increased sharing of selfies leads to decreased feelings of connection and closeness. In other words, your friends will stay closer if you keep your selfies to yourself.

The problem with selfie culture isn't only what we look at; it's also how we love and how we live. In a

culture defined by the selfie, nothing has lasting value but the self. Which means everyone and everything can be disposed of whenever something better shows up.

For example, in "Love in the Time of Algorithms: What Technology Does to Meeting and Mating," Dan Slater examines how online dating services affect the ability of individuals to make commitments. What he finds isn't promising.

When an ever-more-compatible mate can be found with the click of a mouse, why not keep looking and looking and looking? When the going gets tough in one relationship, why not get going and find someone better?

Our things become disposable as well. In the case of the phone, something better shows up about every six months. Writ large, an astounding 99 percent of the stuff we buy winds up in a landfill or recycling plant within six months of purchase. As Paul Hawken explains in his book "Natural Capi-

GION

rs of a degraded worldview

talism," this percentage takes into account not only end products like smartphones, but also everything it took to make them: the gloves used by the woman who checked the circuit board, the container that held the ink used to print the packaging, the chain saw blade used to fell the tree that became the paper in the quick-start guide. It's hard to believe, but six months after purchase, only 1 percent of everything we buy in North America remains in use. It takes disposing of a lot of stuff to ensure that we each have "something better."

Here's the irony: Selfie culture doesn't enhance the self but degrades it. When we turn the lens of life on ourselves, we create the illusion that we should focus only on what's best for us. We continually focus and refocus, constantly revisit options and reevaluate decisions. In doing so, we deprive ourselves of being surrounded by people whom we deeply value because of their long presence and things we deeply value because of

their long use.

Make no mistake, sometimes we make bad decisions, and we need to get out and start over. If you're in a job that's ethically compromising or a relationship that's emotionally or physically abusive, head for the door. But if your life has turned into a slideshow of short-term commitments and temporary relationships, then it's time to refocus. Life isn't a selfie. Rather, it's a complex interweaving of relationships that unite us to the world around us. And while those relationships must fully engage who we are as individuals, they must also fully engage to whom and to what we are related, which ultimately is everything.

The religious lens through which we look at our lives provides us with a wide-angle view — a transcendent perspective from which we see more clearly our connectedness: who we are, where we fit in, and what we ought to do. It captures not only all that is present in our lives and our

world, but also all that is past and all that is possible. Going to church, temple or mosque reminds us that the image of a self-made, self-reliant and self-centered individual is a lie, and a pernicious one at that. We are utterly dependent upon the people and the world around us.

From this realization emerges an ethical commitment that redefines our relationship to everyone and everything else. Because we personally take what we need from the people and the world around us, we must take personally what the people and world around us need. Now that's a view worth keeping on your home screen.

*The Rev. Galen Guengerich is senior minister of All Souls Unitarian Church in New York City, a member of the Council on Foreign Relations and author of *God Revised: How Religion Must Evolve in a Scientific Age* (2013). He wrote this article for On Faith (www.faithstreet.com/onfaith).*