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Agriculture matters most

Tomorrow we celebrate those who till the earth and plant seeds

Nothing is more thrilling to a farmer than planting a seed and standing back to see what happens. Every year about 2.1 million U.S. farmers do just that.

Some plant thousands of acres; others plant a patch of land the size of a small backyard. Still others take former industrial sites in places such as Detroit and Philadelphia and convert them into urban farms.

They are all participating in a 12,000-year-old ritual that has allowed humans to escape the role of hunter-gatherer and create a society where big ideas can be pursued. Once crops could be grown efficiently and animals could be domesticated for milk and meat, humans were free to think beyond their next meal.

Today, farming is done across the globe. In China, farmers have cultivated rice for more than 7,500 years. In Bolivia, another ancient crop, quinoa, attracts extraordinarily high prices among so-called foodies in the U.S. In Brazil, ranchers raise beef cattle similar to those first brought to South America from India.

Agriculture is important everywhere, but nowhere is it more important than in the United States. It was agriculture that helped a handful of colonies blossom into a booming economic powerhouse and world leader. Last year, U.S. farmers raised more than \$400 billion in crops and livestock on slightly more than 900 million acres.

U.S. farmers feed their fellow Americans — and much of the world. U.S. wheat, for example,

can be found in noodles sold by a Tokyo street vender, in flat bread baked in a stone oven in Algiers or in a steamed bun sold in a Jakarta restaurant.

Other crops and products fill the shelves of shops and stores around the world, helping to feed 7 billion people.

Who is the American farmer? Though statistics tell us that the average age is about 58 and the average farm is a little more than 400 acres, no farmer is typical. Just as every family is different, so too is every farmer. Some families have farming in their blood; they have tilled the land for generations. Others are new to it. Starting small, they add equal parts of inspiration and perspiration in an effort to grow new life and a livelihood from the land.

Our society reveres high technology. Smartphones, electric cars and all manner of computer-enhanced gizmos are seen as the wave of the future.

Yet, without agriculture, without food and fiber, none of that would exist. Before there could be iPhones, there had to be plows and tractors and combines.

National Ag Day is Wednesday. It is a day to talk about how food is produced, and about the integral role farming and ranching play in society.

And it is a celebration of the most important industry in the world.

Westport upgrades are welcome

Improvements beckon all of us in Clatsop County

Most area residents know Westport as the state capital of amazing berry products and site of a conveniently located convenience store on the way to Longview, Wash. A smaller number know it as the Oregon-side port for the Columbia River's last ferryboat. Fewer still know it as a rather nice little town with a lot of potential in its own right.

Thanks to active citizens and a generous gift from the Georgia-Pacific Wauna Mill, Westport now has the added potential of becoming more of a destination for recreational users of the river, as well as home to greatly enhanced salmon habitat.

Named for pioneer salmon packer John West — whose name remains synonymous with salmon in Great Britain where his products were intensively marketed — Westport's attractions require leaving U.S. Highway 30 and exploring its connections with the Columbia. The unincorporated town has considerable waterfront, including a boat launch and parking area that are both in need of maintenance.

Neatly timed with the arrival of the new Washington state ferry Oscar B connecting with Puget Island, Wauna's land donation provides the

impetus for a major revitalization effort. Clatsop County plans improvements to the boat launch, park area and access to the adjacent Westport Ferry landing. Future prospects include a trail between the ferry landing and the park and a transient dock, where boaters can tie up for the afternoon.

All this is a wonderful way for county citizens and officials to better utilize the valuable asset of a splendid river shoreline and riparian area.

Playing a major role in all this are Margaret Magruder and the Lower Columbia River Watershed Council, which are spearheading an effort to reconnect Plympton Creek with its historic channel. Like many small tributaries draining into the Columbia estuary, the creek was monkeyed with during settlement times. By applying modern practices in the watershed, salmon will once again have access to valuable habitat. It must be noted that Magruder has been a heroine on behalf of watershed recovery for decades and deserves sustained applause for her tireless work.

The rest of us in Clatsop County and our neighbors in Columbia County should do all we can to support these efforts in Westport.

The digital dog collar

By TIMOTHY EGAN
New York Times News Service

I hate the new Apple Watch. Hate what it will do to conversation, to the pace of the day, to my friends, to myself. I hate that it will enable the things that already make life so incremental, now-based and hyper-connected.

That, and make things far worse.

This has nothing to do with Apple. We can still be friends. I'm writing on a MacBook Air, my constant companion since I kissed off my hometown Microsoft-programmed clunker for the sleek and far less needy Mac some time ago. I'm closer to my iPhone 6 than to some of my siblings — you never call, you never text, you never share, not a selfie in six months.

No, my animus for Apple's smartwatch — excuse me, wearable technology — is for what it will do to us. Things are too complicated as it is. At dinner with friends, or in a meeting that I'm supposed to care about, when can I look at my phone? Who's phone-ignore worthy, and who's not? At what point is looking down rude? And how long into a conversation till all sides get to call a truce and take a screen dive?

I say this as an information obsessive. I wish I could say recovering information obsessive. Like most of us, I'm in need of digital detox, not a fresh hit. Those restroom breaks at restaurants were not about bladder relief. God knows how many times I've sneaked away from the table just to peek at a football score, a *Daily Show* clip, a text, a photo or email, my Amazon book number. What a miserable wretch. But it could be worse: I have a friend who texts while skiing.

Apple says its smartwatch, which it rolled out at one of its Dear Leader-like events in San Francisco last week, will make interactions between human and screen less complicated, and less rude. Instead of reaching into pocket or purse in front of someone, the user will just glance at the wrist. In fact, Apple calls the new feature in which the watch is touched to access the Internet a "glance."

Just a glance, nothing rude there. Oh, really? Remember how off-putting it was when George Bush the elder checked his watch during a question period from the audience in a presidential debate? It may have cost him the elec-



Timothy Egan



AP Photo/Eric Risberg

Apple CEO Tim Cook talks about the new Apple Watch during an Apple event March 9 in San Francisco.

tion in 1992.

People check their phones about 150 times a day. Now, imagine how many glances they'll take with all the information in the world on their wrists. Imagine how many people will attempt to drive while glancing, to walk while glancing, to talk while glancing, to make love while glancing.

To the complaints that our smartphone addiction has produced a world where nobody talks much anymore, nobody listens and nobody reads, you can add a new one with the smartwatch: nobody makes eye contact.

Tim Cook, the Apple CEO, seems like a decent and likable guy — no tech overlord in a Darth Vader suit. But his presentation of the new watch on Monday crept me out, and offered a road map to a world I'm not sure I want to join.

"The Apple Watch is the most personal device we have ever created," he said. "It's not just with you, it's on you." Ewwwww. It sounds like a digital dog collar, complete with an anti-flea component. From here on out, there is no down time, and no excuses for reality escapes. You are connected, 24/7.

Cook tried to humanize Apple's latest culture-disrupter. You can talk to your wrist — it's a phone! You can check your heartbeat — it's a doctor! And if you don't adequately exercise during the week, your watch will remind you of your failure — it's a nag!

He seemed most rapt in describing how much closer together the Apple Watch will bring us all. "You can tap

your watch and get your friends' attention," he said. Ah, there's a rich relationship. I can think of a number of places once considered off-limits for cellphone intrusions — the classroom, the dinner table, the bathtub — where the watch can interrupt. And who's to know: it's only a glance.

There is some evidence that heavy smartphone use makes you dumber. The theory is that a having the world at the other end of a mobile search makes for lazy minds, while people who depend less on their devices develop more analytical skills.

Add to this concerns about privacy: that the watch is a tracking device, which sends all your personal information to a central database — a corporate control center that already knows far too much about the preferences and habits of smartphone users.

It's encouraging that smartwatches, thus far, have not sold very well. This could be because many of them look like those fluorescent wrist bands that people have to wear at all-inclusive resorts in order to line up at the buffet table. Or perhaps people are repulsed, as I am, by this most intimate of invasions.

Backlash is inevitable. A few days ago, Patrick Pichette, Google's chief financial officer, announced that he was retiring because he wanted to spend more time offline. He had this epiphany, he wrote, while watching the sunrise from Mount Kilimanjaro with his wife — an experience Apple has yet to be able to meld to a wristwatch.

Who's phone-ignore worthy, and who's not?

The cost of relativism

By DAVID BROOKS
New York Times News Service

One of America's leading political scientists, Robert Putnam, has just come out with a book called *Our Kids* about the growing chasm between those who live in college-educated America and those who live in high-school-educated America.

It's got a definitive collection of data about this divide.

Roughly 10 percent of the children born to college grads grow up in single-parent households. Nearly 70 percent of children born to high school grads do. There are a bunch of charts that look like open scissors. In the 1960s or 1970s, college-educated and noncollege-educated families behaved roughly the same. But since then, behavior patterns have ever more sharply diverged. High-school-educated parents dine with their children less than college-educated parents, read to them less, talk to them less, take them to church less, encourage them less and spend less time engaging in developmental activity.

Interspersed with these statistics, Putnam and his research team profile some of the representative figures from each social class. The profiles from high-school-educated America are familiar but horrific.

David's mother was basically absent. "All her boyfriends have been nuts," he said. "I never really got to see my mom that much." His dad dropped out of school, dated several women with drug problems and is now in prison. David went to seven different elementary schools. He ended up under house arrest and got a girl pregnant be-

fore she left him for a drug addict.

Kayla's mom married an abusive man but lost custody of their kids to him when they split. Her dad married a woman with a child but left her after it turned out the child was fathered by her abusive stepfather. Kayla grew up as one of five half-siblings from three relationships until her parents split again and coupled with others.

Elijah grew up in a violent neighborhood and saw a girl killed in a drive-by shooting when he was 4. He burned down a lady's house when he was 13. He goes through periods marked by drugs, clubbing and sex but also dreams of being a preacher. "I just love beating up somebody," he told a member of Putnam's team, "and making their nose bleed and just hurting them and just beating them on the ground."

The first response to these stats and to these profiles should be intense sympathy. We now have multiple generations of people caught in recurring feedback loops of economic stress and family breakdown, often leading to something approaching an anarchy of the intimate life.

But it's increasingly clear that sympathy is not enough. It's not only money and better policy that are missing in these circles; it's norms. The health of society is primarily determined by the habits and virtues of its citizens. In many parts of America there are no minimally agreed upon standards for what it means to be a father. There are no basic codes and rules woven into daily life, which people can absorb unconsciously and follow automatically.

Reintroducing norms will require,



David Brooks

first, a moral vocabulary. These norms weren't destroyed because of people with bad values. They were destroyed by a plague of nonjudgmentalism, which refused to assert that one way of behaving was better than another. People got out of the habit of setting standards or understanding how they were set.

Next it will require holding people responsible. People born into the most chaotic situations can still be asked the same questions: Are you living for short-term pleasure or long-term good? Are you living for yourself or for your children? Do you have the freedom of self-control or are you in bondage to your desires?

Next it will require holding everybody responsible. America is obviously not a country in which the less educated are behaving irresponsibly and the more educated are beacons of virtue. America is a country in which privileged people suffer from their own characteristic forms of self-indulgence: the tendency to self-segregate, the comprehensive failures of leadership in government and industry. Social norms need repair up and down the scale, universally, together and all at once.

People sometimes wonder why I've taken this column in a spiritual and moral direction of late. It's in part because we won't have social repair unless we are more morally articulate, unless we have clearer definitions of how we should be behaving at all levels.

History is full of examples of moral revival, when social chaos was reversed, when behavior was tightened and norms reasserted. It happened in England in the 1830s and in the U.S. amid economic stress in the 1930s. It happens through organic communal effort, with voices from everywhere saying gently: This we praise. This we don't.

Every parent loves his or her children. Everybody struggles. But we need ideals and standards to guide the way.

We won't have social repair unless we are more morally articulate.