

H A R L A N R I C H A R D S

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The Siren Song - Tablet Update

Odysseus had to get tied to the mast of his ship while his crew plugged their ears with wax so they could get past the Sirens whose song lured seamen to their deaths. Odysseus wanted to hear the song which is why he was tied to the mast - so he wouldn't jump off the ship and drown trying to reach the Sirens. I've had a tablet since October last year and it reminds me of the lure of the Sirens. It is an insidious device that seeks to drain from its owner all his time and money.

It is wonderful to be able to listen to music that I like and to sample snippets of new songs and artists which are never played on the radio. One new artist I like is Margo Price - a country music singer who sings about real life. Her song, Weekender, is about having to spend weekends in the county jail. "The bed is hard, the cell is cold, and my cellmate has a cough . . ." Other guys listen to music by artists I've never heard of before and I sample their songs to see what I'm missing. But there is a downside. It sucks up money like there's no tomorrow. There's always one more song that I want to buy no matter how many I have (they cost \$1.95 each). I have to strictly budget myself or all my money would be siphoned into my tablet and I'd have nothing left for anything else. Many of those who can afford it have hundreds of songs downloaded.

Not only does my tablet steal my money, it also robs me of my time. It has become the default mechanism of my life. Whenever I have spare time with nothing scheduled to fill it and there's not enough time to delve into a project, I grab the tablet. I send emails several times a day and spend a lot of time reading ebooks. I've read dozens of books and keep finding more that I want to read. I guess it's not a total waste of time since I'm doing something constructive. I usually only listen to music while I'm doing something else - like reading or messaging. Or I listen while I am drawing.

Other guys are equally addicted to their tablets but for different reasons. They will listen to music and play games for hours. It amazes me how many guys play solitaire on their tablets. They never played it with a deck of cards but now that it's on the tablet, they play it. I tell them they have it backwards. You can't cheat on a tablet and solitaire is only fun if you get to cheat so that you can win more often.

For those who are content to let the days roll by in meaninglessness, tablets are wonderful. Years will pass and all they will have to show for it are vague memories of how many points they scored on their video games. I suppose it's better than going to clinical services and getting put on medication. It is amazing how many people permit themselves to be drugged while in prison. I won't buy any games or take any psychotropic drugs because I don't want to get sucked into those destructive habits. I would rather learn, read, write and draw.

Watching how the limited-function tablets have captured the attention of prisoners, I can understand how free-world people can become enslaved to their smart phones. In spite of the drawbacks, tablets in prison are a positive step in the right direction. It gives us old prisoners who have been locked up since before cell phones and all the other technology a chance to become familiar with touch screens and Android operating systems. We won't be nearly as lost when we are released.

But the addictive aspects of technology are a problem and even though I can see the problem, I have no solutions. It will take someone more knowledgeable than me to figure it out.