

Reach out and touch a real someone

By Paul McMullen

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There is a second set of reading glasses in my car – and other spares littering my work station, home office and easy chair.

They come in inexpensive three-packs at BJ's and Costco, but the forgetful and hoarders – and fans of classic science fiction – would just as soon buy them by the gross.

I refer to “Time Enough at Last,” the most revered episode of Rod Serling’s “The Twilight Zone,” the seminal TV series that ran from 1959 to 1964.

Burgess Meredith plays Henry Bemis, tormented by his boss and wife, who conspire to deny him his singular pleasure, reading. It being the height of the Cold War, a hydrogen bomb destroys the world, save for Henry and the volumes in his local library. He is as giddy as a schoolboy – until he trips and breaks his only pair of eyeglasses.

Yesterday’s technological nightmare of the holocaust has given way to today’s, losing digital connectivity.

From “American Hustle” to “Wolf of Wall Street,” six of the nine Best Picture nominees at the March 2 Oscars are based, however loosely, on actual people and events, but of the films I’ve seen, none packed the verisimilitude of a fantasy, “Her.” In a not-too-distant Los Angeles, Theodore Twombly, played by Joaquin Phoenix, is a wordsmith for “Beautiful Handwritten Letters,” which composes correspondence for those who have neither the time nor inclination to craft an authentic message for a loved one.

His marriage in ruins, a very lonely Twombly becomes infatuated with his computer’s operating system, voiced by Scarlett Johansen. It’s your standard boy loses girl, boy falls in love with artificial intelligence, boys loses AI, etc.

Why engage another human when you can converse with your metaphysical avatar, a computer operating system that conforms to your worldview like a glove?

Google zillionaire Ray Kurzweil nodded in approval at the movie’s premise. The prophet of singularity, the day when humanity and technology will become one, Kurzweil predicts that such technology will be in place in 15 years.

Just days before Kurzweil was honored in Baltimore at the American Visionary Arts Museum last month, Pope Francis described the paradox expressed in “Her” when he released his message for the 48th World Communications Day.

The pioneering pope is all for social media, but not at the expense of genuine dialogue. Yes, he said, the Internet is “something truly good, a gift from God,” albeit a tool that “can help us either to expand our knowledge or lose our bearings.”

More from Pope Francis:

- “The speed with which information is communicated exceeds our capacity for reflection and judgment, and this does not make for more balanced and proper forms of self-expression.”
- “The walls which divide us can be broken down only if we are prepared to listen and learn from one another.”
- “We cannot live apart, closed in on ourselves.”

The pope cited Luke 10:29, “And who is my neighbor?” He just as easily could have mentioned Ecclesiastes 1:9, “...there is nothing new under the sun,” as man has too frequently used technology to wall himself off.

A husband hiding from his wife behind a broadsheet newspaper begat Henry Bemis, and the first person to prefer time with a desktop computer to another human begat Theodore Twombly.

I am as guilty as any. Dining out with my wife, I succumb to the urge to pick up my smartphone and check my email and texts and voicemail and the current temperature and updates from the PGA Tour.

I promise to turn the thing off – as soon as I find my glasses.

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