



## “My Tech-Wise Life

Growing Up and Making Choices in a World of Devices”

by Amy Crouch and Andy Crouch, 2020

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### Introduction

Andy Crouch’s “The Tech-Wise Family” was a major inspiration for the family’s section of the TechHuman initiative. We were most interested to see what Amy Crouch (Andy’s daughter) was going to say about her experiences growing up in a ‘Tech-Wise Family’.

Amy and Andy’s new book follows a form of counterpoint. In each chapter Amy presents her thoughts and experiences and her father responds to them in the form of a letter to his daughter. As with The Tech-Wise Family, the observations are underpinned with Barna Group research.

### Exploring “My Tech-Wise Life”

Amy’s experience and insight coupled Andy’s observations are very clear and helpful. In the core of the book, she addresses some of the most critical themes that influence our 21<sup>st</sup> century lives:

- We don’t have to compare ourselves
- We don’t have to be distracted
- We don’t have to be disconnected
- We don’t have to live with secrets
- We don’t have to edit our lives
- We don’t have to avoid boredom
- We don’t have to be exhausted

She concludes the book with a chapter entitled, ‘Living in hope’.

To get us started, Andy points to 1 Timothy 6:17-19 – encouraging us to live so that we may “take hold of the life that is truly life”. That foundation underpins the whole book. Amy begins with a succinct summary of what ‘the Tech-Wise life’ entailed and she presents her hope for the book, “developing small countercultural habits might be like yeast. Small, imperfect actions can bring air and light into my life.”

The book is quite easy to read. Amy approaches the topic personally, and sympathetically, engaging the reader throughout by sharing personal (sometimes painful) experience, drawing us into her world, growing up.

In the first chapter, we see a demonstration of the toxic comparison culture that runs through much social media. Amy describes the cruel way her own insecurities were exposed, in isolation and loneliness. She contrasts that beautifully with the way that trusted, empathetic human friendship can empathise and help repair that damage. Andy says it very well, “I think this is the real way out of insecurity: not actually being protected from it in the first place but being rescued from it by love”.

In the chapter on distraction, Amy tells a poignant story of an assignment at a High School Youth Group retreat. The students were asked to find somewhere where they could sit alone in silence for ten minutes. Amy's colleague's reactions encompassed restlessness, fear, anxiety, and stress that followed just a few minutes of trying to sit still. "Our ten minutes of focus had revealed that distractions were keeping my friends from noticing things that need to change. .... Silence had become dangerous." Here we see one of a number of examples of where Amy's Tech-Wise upbringing helped lay solid foundations – even if she observes that technology tends to grow on top of whatever foundation we have, like barnacles – sometimes obscuring the values and principles that lie beneath.

Both the Tech-Wise Family and this book make the point that the way that physical spaces we inhabit are organised can help shape us – whether that is our home or places we socialise in. I felt a clear challenge to consider what we could be changes how "... so that relationships, not devices, are at the center."

The chapter on secrecy explores how we can achieve a level of 'anonymity' online. While that may enable us to hide secrets from those people we know, we may be surprised to find out how much others – perhaps the technology companies, still know about us and our 'deep secrets'. Andy makes the contrast between being 'anonymous'; that is being without a name, and God's interactions with his people which so often began with him calling them by name. Names are important. If we are to be known, then we need to have a name. Using technology to pursue anonymity is not part of God's plan for us.

We explore the themes of presenting an 'edited' version of ourselves to social media; the dangers of bingeing on entertainment and the risk to sleep posed by our technology habits. I loved Amy's observation that the 'internet tends to make other people less peopley'. It does tend to dehumanise us. As our social media connections move beyond the circle of people we know, love and trust, then we can never be so personal in what we share.

I enjoyed the chapter on bingeing on entertainment. In it, Amy shows how the threads of 'boredom', 'distraction killing conversation' and the 'larger-than-life' digital world combine to produce a culture where wonder is replaced by distraction: a life where we have no margin and we inevitably miss things: good things – perhaps God's things.

There is a significant and growing body of research that, "access to social media and especially a cell phone in teenagers' bedrooms is associated with a reduction in sleep time during the school week with negative effects on daily functioning and mood which increases with increasing age."<sup>1</sup> I think there are few simpler but more significant steps we can take than to habitually leave our technology devices outside our sleeping spaces.

Amy explores the Sabbath. The Biblical command is clear – to take one day in seven and 'keep it holy'. We live in a restless society. One where even large parts of the Church struggle to work out how to deal with that biblical command. The relentless advance of technology has resulted in perpetual busyness rather than more times of rest. If we continue to harbour expectations that digital notifications must be dealt with as they arrive, then observing any form of Sabbath will be counter-cultural. This reflection on the Sabbath has been an aspect of both 'Tech-Wise' books we have found very helpful.

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<sup>1</sup> S. Royant-Parola, V. Londe, S. Tréhout, and S. Hartley, "The Use of Social Media Modifies Teenagers' Sleep Related Behavior," *Encephale* 44, no. 4 (2018): 321–28.

### Conclusion

This is a very practical book. Each chapter ends with simple, specific recommendations as to how the reader might be able to live life better with technology. These suggestions are offered undogmatically, for your consideration. They consistently offer sound advice and will improve your life without asking you technology all together.

This book provides a unique reflection on what it was like growing up within a 'Tech-Wise Family'. Amy's thoughtful and frequently vulnerable reflections offer much wisdom and insight – underscored by Andy's profound responses. One of the great strengths of both books is the sheer humanity and integrity the shines through.

There is plenty on offer here for people of all ages: whether young people beginning to move into adolescence, teenagers perhaps wrestling with some of the challenges that technology offers, young adults taking their first steps in the world, parents, carers, or grandparents. We can all learn from Amy's experience and Andy's wisdom.

In his conclusion, Andy raises one of my biggest concerns. Despite all the candour and wisdom on offer here you might conclude that you are fine and don't need to change a thing. To me, this book demonstrates clearly that living a Tech-Wise life requires us to keep on making positive choices. It won't just happen as the result of one decision or good intentions alone. We will make mistakes – and we need to give ourselves grace to do that and move forwards.

Andy began the book by inviting us to "take hold of the life that is truly life". To do that: to celebrate, to feast, to love then this is invariably best done in community, in relationship with other living human beings. It is only there that we can fully celebrate our triumphs, completely share in our sorrows, and find true encouragement from one another. It is in community and in family that we can be loved, accepted, and known. Digital technology offers a semblance of 'comfort' and 'connection' on a very grand scale; yet the reality it turns out to be a pale shadow of the real thing.

Amy says near the end of the book:

*"Loneliness is, I think, the hardest of all. Loneliness followed me closely when I was a teen, as it did most people I know. And it can destroy us like nothing else can. Slowly, though, I've emerged from it. I have plunged deeply into community and discovered what a lie it is that I am ever alone. I have set aside the endless visions of friends on my screens and sought the real thing. I have learned to take a deep breath and take the great risk of getting to know someone."*

I found this a very helpful companion to 'The Tech-Wise Family' – one that enables us to extend the conversation and consider further how to put people not devices at the centre of our lives.

Jonathan Ebsworth