The latest scourge on the Republic, we are told, would be people who flagrantly, openly and notoriously -- are you ready? -- text message while they are walking. These textwalkers stride like the undead, it is said, head down, smacking into light poles, other people and occasionally even splattering themselves against oncoming traffic.

What's the problem? you may say. Let genetic selection do its work.

But no. The ever-vigilant American College of Emergency Physicians will have none of it. It has sounded the alarm not only against textwalking, but against texting while motorcycling or playing football. The Consumer Product Safety Commission, meanwhile, warns of the perils of texting while cooking noodles after a 13-year-old girl suffered belly, leg and arm burns. One alert Illinois state legislator, Rep. Ken Dunkin (D-Chicago), has introduced a bill making textwalking a crime.

This raises the obvious question of what other activities should be banned.

(Montgomery County: Here's your big chance.)

· Texting while applying suntan lotion.

· Texting while tying your kid's shoes.

· Texting while making any dessert that involves honey.

· Texting while reading Braille.

· Texting while performing a bris.

· Texting while cliff-climbing.

· Texting while slipping the ring on a bride's finger.

· Walking while chewing gum.

But let us put aside for a moment the inconvenient facts about this blight and curse that has conveniently surfaced in the dog days of summer. Okay, so there are no data to provide evidence of this textwalking epidemic. Okay, so one oft-cited anecdote turns out to be a publicity stunt -- the ITN video from east
London showing lampposts supposedly being padded to protect them from bumbling texters. Okay, so death by textwalking is not new. In 2006, Miss Deaf Texas, while walking near the tracks in Austin texting family and friends, was hit from the rear by a Union Pacific train.

Let us instead promptly ankle right over to Connecticut and K, arguably the epicenter of the District's Type A's. Let us pigeonhole passersby in a decidedly unscientific sample of that portion of the human race who seem prone to texting while walking. These defiers of death, one recent lunchtime, displayed a marked demographic skew -- early 20s to late 30s, typically, and female.

"I think of something to say and I'm too busy to stop," says Kate Beer, 23, of Springfield. "I need to get back quickly. I know, it's not the smartest."

"I live on the edge," says Alison Block, 29, of the District. "I can type without looking at the screen."

"If you can, you must," says Nicole Fulgham, 39, of the District, who insists she was only reading while walking, and besides, she needs access to the information because she is running late for a meeting. "All of a sudden you get pieces of information and you can't live without it." Then she starts looking around and says, "Wait, is there a hidden camera?"

Many who walk while texting also cop to driving while texting but they always claim mitigating circumstances.

"My husband is the only one I text while driving," says Johnneca McKinney, 28, of the District. "He can get his point across, and I can read it and think about it."

Almost everyone who walks while texting totally denies ever walking into a tree, or another person, much less traffic.

"Talent," says Kim Rosenberg, 31, of Rockville, regarding how she manages to dodge death with every BlackBerry step.

"I can understand, but I think you're generally conscious of what's going on around you, even if you don't see whether the lights are red or green," says Jacob Enriquez, 29, of Springfield. The electronic gizmo in his hand turns out not to be a BlackBerry but an electronic Bible. Sadly, he reports, "I've never gotten an inspiration while walking."

Strategies exist for dodging the Grim Reaper. The perfect angle is to hold the screen just forward of one's nose, so as to readily peer over it like reading glasses, says Julia Regner, 26, of Clarendon. Oh yes, she's given this some thought. "Of course I'm anxious. Who isn't?" she says.

A 39-year-old Manassas man in the shipping business named Mark is too embarrassed to give his last name after acknowledging that he did once almost take out a Washington Post sidewalk box with a BlackBerry Bump.

Ah, but it's Nora Castellano, 28, of Arlington who finally comes clean. "Yes, I can see that," when apprised of the horrors of textwalking.

Pause.
"I've almost bumped into people."

Pause.

"Well, I may have bumped."

Hurriedly she adds, "But it was never a disaster!"

What is up with this? Are we helpless in its grip? Can we simply not prevent ourselves from instantly sharing with everyone we know the opportunity for cosmic union over Heath Ledger's death or John Edwards's peccadilloes?

To a scary degree, yes, says Naomi S. Baron, professor of linguistics at American University and author of "Always On: Language in an Online and Mobile World."

"First it was just doctors and drug dealers" who felt compelled to be always on, Baron says. But now, "it has to do with insecurity about friendships." The fear is, "If I don't get back, if I'm not sufficiently responsive to an invitation to go out to dinner or a movie, that person will move on to someone else, won't be my best friend."

We also get bored. "Bored with our surroundings, ourselves," Baron says. Studies of instant messaging show young people talking with 15 or 20 others at once. "Just one conversation? That would be too weird," she reports them saying. "Because you're supposed to keep all these balls in the air rather than be bored by 'listening' to one person's conversation."

This is by no means to say that "a technology has to be used all the ways it could be used," Baron says. "You can change behavior patterns. It's not that hard to do." People are learning not to be boors, shouting into their cellphones in restaurants, just as they have learned where not to smoke.

The question is how you accomplish this transformation.

It's not inconceivable that people are bumping into things, says Peter D. Norton, a University of Virginia assistant professor of the history of technology. "In college towns 50 or 100 years ago, people were doing that with books."

In general, "you got a social problem, you got a couple classes of solutions," says Norton. "One is to make it illegal and fine people."

One finds that threat more frequently aimed at litterbugs than people reading books while walking. But even in those cases, enforcement is so rare that it just makes both the citizens and the constabulary cranky, Norton points out.

"Another is to make people feel bad -- that their behavior is just the wrong thing to do." He recalls the "crying Indian" commercial that no one who grew up in the '70s can forget, which portrayed littering as a sin against Mother Earth.

"Another angle is ridicule. Make people feel stupid for doing this." The word "jaywalker" was deployed in the early days of the automobile to make people who walked in the streets feel like country bumpkins, Norton notes in his book "Fighting Traffic." It worked. They got out of the way of the automobiles.
The real solution to any purported plague of textwalking is that all this tiny keyboard technology is going to be largely obsolete in two to three years, says Michael Wehrs, who works for Nuance Communications, one of those blazingly hot tech firms that give people titles like "vice president, evangelism" which, sure enough, is what it says on his business card.

Nuance is the creator of the best-selling Dragon NaturallySpeaking software that turns the spoken word into text. After years of laughable results, Dragon and its competitors are getting so good as to cause serious unemployment among transcriptionists. The fat target now is to move beyond desktop and laptop computers and into phones. Check out Nuance's "Man vs. Machine" stunt on YouTube, where it pits what is billed as the world's fastest texter against its voice recognition handheld, and the texter goes the way of John Henry that steel-driving man.

Nuance is in the business of getting rid of all keyboards, worldwide, soon. Well maybe not all keyboards. "I don't want to come across as -- under all circumstances, our corporate mission is to eliminate the use of texting in terms of keyboard entry," says Wehrs.

He can see occasions, for example, when no matter how accurate the software is at turning speech into text, you will want to use a keyboard. Like when you're in a noisy bar.

But Wehrs absolutely sees the day coming soon when your strong preference will be to talk to your computer, not type at it. Like Spock, on "Star Trek." In 2008, Nuance expects to ship a quarter of a billion copies of its software that allows you to call somebody by speaking the person's name. It's getting so common that many people worldwide don't even realize their cheap phones can do that.

The only time you will want to let your thumbs do the talking, Wehrs thinks, is when you are being driven wildly, toweringly mad by the speech your boss is giving.

But if you're walking while doing that, you may have bigger problems than whacking a potted plant.