

Virtual Community? A Gift to Be Nourished

JON ANDERSON

God is creating something new and old in the advent of communities growing through the digital pathways of social media. Like every part of God's creation, social media can be used to deepen, sustain, and build community and serve God's purposes. It can also be misused to damage human community, distract from intimacy, and steal people from the fullness of God's gift of life.

We are early in the process of seeing all the implications of God's gift of the Internet. We have much to learn about being wise stewards of the new possibilities. We also have come a long way from the early days of huge computers and DOS.

God creates human beings with a longing for human community. God forms community in physical gatherings every day. At the same time, communities of people are gathering every day and night by using the Internet. These communities develop within email lists, Facebook groups, in the comments on a blog, or around Twitter hashtags. We have much to learn about being careful stewards of all kinds of community.

Bill Smith, longtime professor of pastoral care at Luther Seminary (now deceased), used to talk about four types or levels of communication. Each level is deeper. The goal is to move down through the levels to get to deep communication and deeper community. The first level is small talk: "The weather sure is beautiful today." The second is control talk, the realm of commands, seeking to manipulate or move someone to where you want them to be. The third kind of communication is searching talk: "I wonder why the ELCA Facebook Clergy Page is so often a place of harsh communication?" The fourth level, which can only be reached with care and time, is straight talk where people are emotionally open and authentically speak from the deepest parts of their hearts and minds.

Virtual community and its participants struggle with all the normal forms of sin. It is easy to turn in on yourself and hang around only with people who share your worldview and experiences. It is easy to behave in ways that miss the mark in terms of a lack of compassion, curiosity, or civility. It is easy to stay silent when people throw words at each other like Molotov cocktails. People get lost in virtual communities while failing to engage their spouse or children hungering for attention.

Yet, I do not fear social media. It amplifies some parts of communal life, even

(continued on page 184)



Virtual Community? The Absence of Presence

BILL HOLMES

It is now our turn to confess that we no longer know what presence means.

—Ralph Harper¹

She had just been told she had metastatic cancer. At the oncologist's request and with her permission, I sat at her bedside listening to her story. Six family members sat around the room, but only two appeared to be listening to what she had to say. The other four were staring at their smartphones; they were tuned into Facebook, checking emails, or texting. At her hour of greatest need, some of her family was in cyberspace, a virtual world—or ironically, on a “social network.” Their bodies were in the room but their attention was elsewhere; they were not truly present to their loved one. There was an absence of presence.

With Harper, I see presence as not only our bodies being in spatial relationship to each other, but also as a full awareness of what is happening and being said, both verbally and nonverbally. Presence is experienced by all the senses. We see each other with all of our wrinkles and scars; we hear each other with all our intonations and nuances; we touch each other with a touch that we have hopefully known before or will know again. Even our sense of smell at times might identify the scent of significant people in our lives, even before we see or hear them.

In our age of “virtual” everything, our sense of presence to each other and to God has diminished. Sherry Turkle observes that technology has offered us a substitute for face-to-face connection.² And we have bought into it as we have let technology redefine the boundaries between intimacy and solitude. Rather than investing ourselves in others, rather than getting to know each other face to face, we build a list of Facebook friends and then are left to wonder if they are really friends and what that means. As we recreate ourselves as online personae and avoid real-time happenings (because they might take too much time), we may find ourselves feeling utterly alone. Knowing each other and God intimately takes investment of time *and of ourselves*.

At a recent chaplains' conference the virtues of technology were extolled as a means of spiritual presence. A good deal of excitement and affirmation was voiced

¹Ralph Harper, *On Presence: Variations and Reflections* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006) 1.

²Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other* (New York: Basic Books, 2012).

(continued on page 185)

as it underperforms in deepening relationships in other ways. The greatest danger is that we stay on the surface, not showing enough curiosity or going deep together.

For people who live on the prairie in rural culture, virtual community is a great gift. For a synod spread over a lot of space, social media is a great tool to share our life together so we can celebrate the beauty of life and lament together about our deepest disappointments.

The new president of Gustavus Adolphus College in Saint Peter, Minnesota, Rebecca Bergman, built her inaugural address around the theme of community. She quoted community psychologist David McMillan to help us all think about caring for and building community. He has four pillars that work together to create a sense of community: *spirit, trust, trade, and art*.*

Virtual community has a *spirit* to which we all contribute. We seek to nurture a spirit of gratitude and mission in our synodical work. One of our most recent experiments has been trying to build a community of learning around a book. A Facebook group serves as our platform. We are having success at building a web of relationships between pastors and lay leaders, thanks to a contributing professor. The topic is our relationship to money. I am witnessing people who would not have found each other or been engaged with each other teach me and others.

If people do not *trust* one another then they cannot or will not share their lives. Shepherding practices that deepen trust online is important if you want to see your community move beyond small talk and cat videos. *Trading* ideas and resources builds community. I love to watch pastors sharing questions with friends and strangers to deepen and broaden their imaginations. Trading information makes for a rich community. Social media allow people to share their lives in pictures, writing, and *art*. People love to share the beauty of God's artful work on the prairie and share the stories of their lives.

There is nothing like being face to face in a time of crisis. Yet, forms of virtual community can support people in a crisis. When our son was injured in a hit-and-run accident, Facebook allowed us to keep the story straight with our friends and family, letting them know about his injury and recovery.

There are some things virtual community can do and other things it cannot. God's gift of social media blesses my life with relationships that I would never have had or sustained because of the distance between the people involved. In our synod's life, we love to share stories and pictures of what God is up to. It is a way the Creator of the universe weaves us together. ⊕

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*See Bergman's address at <https://news.blog.gustavus.edu/2014/10/03/read-president-bergmans-inaugural-address/> (accessed February 14, 2015).

for what I call “techno-spirituality.” While I see the possibilities offered by new technology, I fear we will be fooled into believing we are fully present to one another. Why must we feel more at home or comfortable with a virtual presence than a real presence? Is it because we are not capable of giving ourselves completely, an act that cannot be done in virtual space or cyberspace but requires what Martin Buber called “the real, filled present”?³

Social media offer some good things, such as keeping in touch with old friends and family in distant places. For those confined by ill-health or other circumstances, Facebook can be at least some level of connection. And who does not want to see pictures of grandchildren or use FaceTime to chat with them? Texting clearly has value as a means of rapid communication and can be lifesaving in emergencies—but life-taking when done while driving. We seem preoccupied now with such technologies, allowing them to become a poor substitute for real presence, for face-to-face encounters.

We are in a sense becoming digitally disembodied. Observe any public event and you will find that a substantial number of people are on their “smartphones” as the ball game or the lecture or, yes, even worship happens. Ironically, in the age of Facebook, we are in danger of losing face-to-face presence. How do we come to know and understand the mystery of the other without real or actual presentness? If we must do our technological communication *ad nauseum*, let us never fool ourselves into believing that we are in fact present to the other in our entirety, with our whole being.

We risk remaining strangers to one another. We fail to give ourselves to each other by sitting face to face and listening in a life-giving manner. We keep ourselves for ourselves as we hit “send” or “post.” To leave cyberspace for real presence is to give ourselves without the fear that we will have nothing left if we do. We cannot afford to be dismissive or take lightly that which is communicated by a grasped hand, a breathing pattern, an intonation, a look, and the ineffable experience of just being there. It is in the face-to-face encounter with our iPhones *turned off* that we find real presence rather than loneliness and even darkness.

Why do I hold these concerns? Why am I so convinced? I have been both the one holding the smartphone and the one who experienced the absence of presence when real presence was direly needed. ⊕

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³Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Ronald Gregor Smith (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1937) 12; online at <http://www.tjdonovanart.com/Martin%20Buber%20-%20I%20And%20Thou%20%28c1923%20127P%29.pdf> (accessed February 13, 2015).