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**Absent to Those Present:
The Conflict between Connectivity and Communion**

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Social technology allows us to transcend where we are and connect to a virtual community of friends wherever they happen to be. It is not uncommon, for example, to be sitting around a table with people who, thanks to their devices, are silently connecting to those who are not there. Bodies are in one place and minds are in another. The ancient Greeks had a saying about daydreamers like these: “Absent while present” (Heraclitus 1979, 29). Today, social technology makes us absent to those present in two ways: first, our minds are absent to those around us and, second, our bodies are absent to those we are connected to. Either our minds or our bodies are absent. What social technology cannot deliver (and in fact encourages us to ignore) is intentional bodily presence. Should we be concerned by this absence? I think so, because communion begins in and is nourished by bodily presence, and we humans have an innate need for such communion.

In this chapter, I first analyze the technologically mediated connection, which I call “connectivity,” and contrast it with others ways of communing with family members, neighbors, coworkers, and friends, which I refer to simply as “communion.” I argue that connectivity competes with communion, because such connections make it possible to be always present to those that are absent, which correspondingly makes us absent to those who are present. I provide a phenomenological description of immediate and mediate interpersonal presence (in person, by

telephone, by video call, by letter, by email, by text, and by social media) to show how and why recent technology differs from older forms such as telephone and letter-writing. I then call attention to the importance of bodily presence for affording communion. Finally, I point to the importance of absence and thoughtfulness for giving us something real to talk about when we are together. Interpersonal presence draws its life from our bodies and our thoughts.

The Novelty of Connectivity

We say that our devices allow us to be “connected” in new and exciting ways that people have never experienced before. For example, in 2012 Google CEO Eric Schmidt gave Boston University’s commencement address, saying:

You’re connecting to each other in ways those who came before you could never dream of. And you’re using those connections to strengthen the invisible ties that hold humanity together, and to deepen our understanding of the world around us. You are emblems of the sense of possibility that will define this new age. (Schmidt 2012)

What is a “connection,” and how is it different from the way people used to relate to one another before the advent of social technology?

Connections rest on the temporary choices of the person. The individual effortlessly chooses friends, products, and services. One week we may connect with So and So, the next week we may not. Such choices are not even constrained by geographical proximity. We can connect to people across the globe in Australia as easy as people across the room. It doesn’t matter where our body is, for our minds can meet in cyberspace. In communion, by contrast, daily interactions were dictated by proximity and bodily presence. People had no choice but to commune with the family members with whom they lived, their neighbors, their co-workers or schoolmates around them, and nearby friends. Unlike connectivity, then, non-technological interactions related to shared situations, such as home, work, or school. They were for the most

part assigned to people instead of being chosen by them. The number of interactions was determined by the effort of bodily presence needed to bring them about.

The difference between communion and connectivity, then, is that communion presupposes a community of people to which one belongs without specifically having chosen to do so. It relates to a whole pattern of life built around natural needs for food, shelter, community, and understanding. Connectivity, by contrast, presupposes no such community and instead makes the relation turn on the effortless preferences of the individual. Our devices free us to transcend bodily presence to establish virtual presence to a multitude of absent people.

What is the relation between connectivity and communion? Doesn't connectivity just build on top of communion, as a mere extension of friendship? Precisely because connectivity denies proximity and bodily presence, it is always available (save for power failures, battery outages, and network glitches). Moreover, when we are connecting we are not communing with those around us. As we travel through the world, driving, walking, working, shopping, eating, and so on, the people around us appear insubstantial compared to the continual conversation connectivity always affords. When we are bodily present to others we are always on the verge of leaving them for connectivity (always looking for the least provocation to check our devices), and when we are connecting we are oblivious to those around us. Connectivity crowds out opportunities for community with family and friends. Family members need no longer interact with one another, because connections are always available. Friends present to one another do the same thing they do when they are absent: connect to absent people. To be present to those

bodily absent, we acquired mobile devices with the unintended consequence of being absent to those with whom we are bodily present.¹

Degrees of Personal Presence

Perhaps I am being too hard on connectivity. After all, didn't letter writing and the telephone already allow people to choose who they wanted to interact with? Language allows us to talk about things that are absent (I can tell someone about a trip abroad), and technology enables us to present language in the absence of the language speaker (you're reading my words right now although I'm nowhere to be seen). Technology affords conversation across the distance separating bodies in two ways: by conveying the *sound* of our speech (telephone and video call) or by conveying our *written* words (letters, emails, texts, and social networking). Today the connectivity of email, texting, and social networking encourages continual, instantaneous production and consumption of content by an increasing number of connections. As I will show in this section, they thus differ from older forms of technologically mediated social interaction such as letter writing and phone conversations.

In Person: Among all the ways to converse, conversation in the flesh is the most powerful. Unfolding in real-time, supported by the natural expressiveness of our bodies, such conversation allows us to encounter another person and, in doing so, to come to know ourselves. Conversations occur naturally in the context of a focal practice or joint activity such as going for a walk, having a meal, and drinking coffee.² Buoyed by the sunny day or jointly affected by each other's sorrowful moods, our communing occurs not only in conversation, but in a wider

¹ Several psychological studies support the same point. See, for example, Pryzbylski and Weinstein 2012. On the unintended effects of technology in general, see Kass 2002, 29-53.

² On focal practices, see Borgmann 1984, 196-210. On eating as a focal practice, see Kass, 1999.

setting afforded by the fact that our bodily natures are present to each other. The tasty meal (or the overcooked one) affords a pre-conversational communion out of which our conversation naturally arises. We can face the faces of other people, see them seeing us, or respond to their responding to our response: “When we make eye contact, our attentions join and we face the world together. Here we do not look *at* the other’s eye, but *with* them. ... Such a look says, ‘I see you seeing me’ or ‘you see me seeing you’ and ‘together we are considering the same thing’” (Engelland 2010, 451). This ability to face each other supports the back-and-forth, give-and-take characteristic of conversation. It enables us to see how another is affected by what we say and such affection makes us vulnerable and bonds us together. There simply is no substitute for the raw exposure of self to self that happens in the flesh. Naturally, we can still undermine interpersonal communion even in this context. For example, St. Augustine went so far as to carve a rule prohibiting gossip into his dining room table: “Who injures the name of an absent friend / May not at this table as guest attend” (Possidius 1919, 95). The table is a focal point for fellowship and bodily presence.

By Telephone: Alexander Graham Bell’s invention allows conversation to occur across distance at the same time even with those sitting at other tables. It does so by conveying the presence of one’s voice alone. The body is visually absent but the telephone allows the tempo and tone of the voice to carry much of the mood of the other. There is no visual object of our attention, which means we can become wholly absorbed by the conversation, not tethered by any perceptual support from our immediate surroundings. While on the phone, we are consequently absent to those about us. The advent of the mobile phone transforms the telephone. Instead of people calling someone’s house, they call someone. Before we might reasonably not have been at home; now, however, we are always available to a would-be caller and that also means we are

always ready to be distracted from whatever we are doing or whatever conversation we are presently having.

By Video Call: The video call adds to the telephone a presentation of our interlocutor's body, her facial expressions, her gestures, as well as the setting in which she finds herself. It conveys more of the mood of the other person, but it also serves to heighten the jarring difference of setting. We peer out from our vantage point into a very different place. The video message calls attention to the fact that we are not in the same place in a way that the phone call passes over. Unlike a conversation in person, there is no joint domain of mood and action. We aren't necessarily under the same weather, the same time of day, and it is more difficult to gauge and receive the mood of the other. We cannot share the same pot of coffee, take a stroll, or enjoy the same meal together. Also, due to the mediation, it is impossible to look into the other person's eyes. Either we look into the off-center camera, so that they see us looking directly at them (with the tradeoff that we are not directly looking at them on the screen) or we look directly at them (with the tradeoff that our eyes do not look into the camera at them but away from them at the screen).³ The result is that in a video call each appears distracted from the other. We can see a moving picture of the other person, but we can't *see them seeing us*, the dynamic that makes conversations in the flesh so communicative.

By Letter: The art of writing a letter allows conversations to occur across distance although not at the same time. Handwriting betrays something of the writer's person and mood. The introduction of the typewriter and then the keyboard removes these vestiges of the body. The words themselves could be anybody's. The signature at the end is the last vestige of

³ Perhaps in the distant future technology could overcome this problem by creating goggles that would allow us to face a three-dimensional hologram or avatar of our interlocutor; perhaps we would be able to look into the image of their eyes; but we still could not shake hands, hug, or share a meal. Such presence would still fall short of bodily presence.

authenticity. In letter writing, the form of expression has the virtue of inviting reflection on just what will be expressed, since there is some effort in expression; consequently, there is a tendency to avoid idle gossip and to speak of more important things. Yet what is lost is much of the back-and-forth interplay as it occurs in the midst of conversation in the flesh. And there is no joint setting or joint activity.

By Email: Email communication stands between letter writing and texting. The signature, the last vestige of the body in a typed letter, gives way to the email address as certifier of authenticity. The email adds the possibility of effortlessly copying a message to many. It is ideally suited for informing, not communing. Email messages with the content of a letter are strange and frankly overwhelming; as welcome as they might be we don't really want to go through the trouble of responding to them. It is too much trouble to write something substantial; it is much easier to forward a message or send quick little bits of information. Due to its ease, emailing becomes much more frequent than letter writing. It also differs in this: whereas mail comes but once or twice a day, emails arrive episodically but frequently throughout the day. Email encourages an increase of messages with a corresponding decrease in significance.

By Texting: Texting is a form of writing that allows conversations to take place across distance at the same time. There is a back-and-forth interplay lacking in letter writing and emailing, but the short format and instantaneous conveyance that makes this possible further discourages thoughtfulness and encourages quick, short replies. A letter does not demand to be answered immediately, because it takes time to be delivered, but texts and calls, since they are virtually instantaneous, demand immediate answering. The tradeoff between quantity and quality, introduced by the email, becomes heightened (Turkle 2011). Emoticons and emoji try to substitute for the lack of personal expression afforded by the anonymous means of

communication. The quantity of texts and shared images increases so that we constantly receive new ones.

By Social Media: Social networking allows us to keep track of others and communicate with others via mediation of some kind. We post a message or a picture that we make available to our connections. In such a situation we do not so much talk to others and are not so much talked to by others as we talk about ourselves and hear other people talk about themselves. We learn much *about* many others but we do not *encounter* them (Dreyfus 2009, 49-88). Selfies testify to a deep desire to be encountered. Sharing a selfie says, in effect, “Look at me!”⁴ However, the image does not allow *us* to be seen: my viewing your image and your viewing my image does not capture the dynamic interplay of personal presence. In the flesh, you see me in the act of seeing you and I see you in the act of seeing me. In social media, our appearance is truncated. Also, we have to keep our messages short because they are being broadcast to so many and because our readers, consuming so many different posts, do not have the leisure to make their way through something longer. We also do not have much to say, since our own habit of communication and thus thinking has been fashioned by the short bursts of texts and images that fill social media. Social media always provides us with something productive, stimulating, and easy to do: read our feeds and occasionally make comments. We are informed and we are entertained.

Intimacy and Bodily Presence

Technology allows us to publish our thoughts and be more widely known at least concerning those bits of ourselves that can be conveyed in this way: facts, fancies, and photographs. But the more it makes us publically known the less it makes us intimately known.

⁴ I am grateful to Marty Dober for this observation.

Technology allows us to connect with people who are absent by leaving aside our full bodily presence, but it is just this full bodily presence that affords the possibility of experiencing true intimacy and interpersonal communion. Our bodies, moods, shared activities, and eye contact contribute much to the communion of human persons (Engelland 2014, 131-170). Intimacy requires exclusivity, which requires our living bodies. Augustine spoke of the many bodily acts that solidify a friendship:

To talk and to laugh with them; to do friendly acts of service for one another; to read well-written books together; sometimes to tell jokes and sometimes to be serious; to disagree at times, but without hard feelings, just as a man does with himself; and to keep our many discussions pleasant by the very rarity of such differences; to teach things to the others and to learn from them; to long impatiently for those who were absent, and to receive with joy those joining us. These and similar expressions, proceeding from the hearts of those who loved and repaid their comrades' love, by way of countenance, tongue, eyes, and a thousand pleasing gestures, were like fuel to set our minds ablaze and to make but one out of many (Augustine 1960, 4.8.13).

Some of these activities can occur via social technology, but even then they lose some of their allure because of the absence of the body. We can read a joke on a Facebook wall and laugh, but it is funnier when we are bodily present and can react to the bodily reactions of others—that's when laughter rages out of control and causes us to split our sides. Intimacy comes not only from the content of our conversation but also from the reciprocity of our bodily bearing that confirms the other person even as one is confirmed oneself: "Intimacy is rooted ... in the unique *being present* of a person; and the principal mark of intimacy is *attentiveness to the presence of another*" (Schmitz 2007, 161). The difference between connectivity and communion comes out most forcefully in those moments when people vainly try to establish communion with a connection; consider, for example, the case of sexting in which people try to be intimate with a connection only to expose themselves to others.⁵

⁵ I am grateful to Kevin Klonowski for this point.

There is no natural limit to how many connections one can have, because the individual connections require little bodily effort. At the same time, these connections do not satisfy our craving for friendship and intimacy, because the quantity and quality of mediated conversations are inversely related. Aristotle thinks we should want as many close friends as possible, but, since close friendship requires bodily presence and focal practices, it is not possible to have many: “As to our seeking and praying for many friends, while we say that the man who has many friends has no friend, both are correct. For if it is possible to live with and share the perceptions of many at the same time, it is most desirable that these should be as numerous as possible; but since this is most difficult, the activity of joint perception must exist among fewer” (1984, 7.12, 1245b20-24). Intimates share a table together and tables can only be so big. The body enables a rich presence, its absence a poorer one, but precisely because it is poorer it can be multiplied without effort thanks to technology.

Absence and Thoughtfulness

So far I have highlighted the importance of bodily presence, but now let me say something surprising: absence is important, too, because bodily presence is not enough for communion. We have to have something to talk about. Here thoughtfulness is crucial, and thoughtfulness requires solitude. Henry David Thoreau observes, “When our life ceases to be inward and private, conversation degenerates into mere gossip” (1993, 360). He also realizes that absence of inwardness leads us to seek more earnestly a quantity of conversations: “In proportion as our inward life fails, we go more constantly and desperately to the post-office. You may depend on it, that the poor fellow who walks away with the greatest number of letters, proud of his extensive correspondence, has not heard from himself this long while” (1993, 361).

Proud as we are of our connections there might be someone we're not connected to: ourselves. Since we are always present to others we have no occasion to think for ourselves and therefore to know ourselves. And this means we have little to contribute to conversation when we are present to others. We can only repeat what we've heard, not what we've thought.

Presence is an achievement, and it requires absence and solitude to be properly nourished. The sort of presence achieved by returning from absence is the sort of presence that can reach deeper into the things of the world. People were desperate for Socrates's presence and yet, from time to time, he would wander off lost in contemplation (Plato 1997, 175b). When he would return he said things that were startling, strange, and wonderful. He led people to see the world in a deeper way. He couldn't have done this if he spent all his time in the presence of others without himself drinking from the depths of things. Now, none of us is a Socrates, but we can always be more thoughtful than we are if we but withdraw from the buzz to think. In 1970, after my parents had been dating for nine months, my mom went with some friends to Hawaii for ten days; my dad felt her absence keenly and thoughtfully; when she returned, he proposed. Had their relationship begun today, they would have been connecting constantly and he would not have had much time or occasion to consider her absence and thus to appreciate her presence nor would he have realized the full depth of his own feelings for her. Full presence requires the presence of original thought, thought nourished by genuine contemplation, and the presence of the body. Incessant mindless presence in fact makes us absent to everybody, ourselves included. We do not have time to know ourselves since we know everything about everybody else, including what they just bought on Amazon and what they made for dinner.

Being Present to Those Present

If connectivity does not satisfy our deep desire for communion in the flesh then why do we continually sacrifice opportunities to commune for opportunities to connect? What is so alluring about connectivity? Why does it trump the more meaningful alternative? There is something deeply puzzling about connectivity and its mysterious hold on us. Perhaps part of the answer is the risk built into communion in the flesh. When we are with people, we have to rely on the inspiration of the moment; we blurt things out and cannot take it back; there's no delete button or opportunity to edit. Also, people look at us with eyes that not only love but also judge; we are vulnerable to the gazes of others. Communion in the flesh takes so much time and we are desirous to cut corners wherever we can for the sake of ease. If connectivity can give us conversation without costs it seems better. Moreover, we are deeply afraid we might be missing out on something happening elsewhere. We do not appreciate the ebb and flow of conversation; as soon as a lull presents itself in the flesh we switch to connectivity. However, spontaneity, vulnerability, time, exclusivity, and the interplay of activity and rest are precisely those ingredients that make intimacy possible. Communion is a difficult but great good; if we turn from the difficulty to an easier substitute we should be mindful that we are also turning from something that will satisfy us to something that won't.

The sort of connections afforded by social networking can allow us to keep "in touch" with those we have already encountered in the flesh. But the trade off is that we are "out of touch" with those around us as well as our own bodily selves. Previous ways of communing with those absent were occasional, but social networking is continuous and persistent. As social networkers, then, we are always present to those absent and absent to those present. But it is being present in the flesh that really animates friendship, that begins it and that nourishes it. We

humans are wired for communion—nothing else will satisfy us—and so we would do well to recollect, disconnect, and commune: (1) *recollect* by recalling our desire for communion and the inability of connectivity to deliver, (2) *disconnect* by fasting from devices especially when we are present to people, such as dinner and hanging out, and (3) *commune* by doing things and being present to those we care about. Rather than living in the constancy of mediated presence, we should cultivate an appreciation for the interplay of presence and absence and a commitment to the primacy of bodily presence. Our bodies limit us to the here and now, but the here and now we share with others thanks to our bodies is no limitation; it is the continuous possibility for intimacy and communion.⁶

⁶ For comments on earlier drafts of this chapter, I am thankful to Damian Ference, Marty Dober, Kevin Klonowski, Silvia Madrigal, Claudia Schussman, Greg Schussman, Camille Kennedy, and members of the University of Dallas philosophy club.

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