Seeking the Sound of Silence:

Human Presence and the Acoustics of Solitude

Stephanie Bennett
Palm Beach Atlantic University
steffasong@aol.com

The presence of the word in the world has changed as technology has advanced, and with each technological shift the enduring word alters the social environment as well as the inner landscape of the mind. In today's advanced technological and pervasively mediated communication environment, the digital devices used to extend the spoken word accomplish what is asked of them, but do much more. Ubiquitous computing is reshaping the way we map the social landscape and the way reality is perceived. A seismic shift in social structure, cultural protocols, and the perceptual faculties of the brain each represent an aspect of these expansive changes, which are intrinsically rooted in language. As Walter J. Ong (1967) writes, "The word itself is both interior and exterior: it is, as we have seen, a partial exteriorization of an interior seeking another interior. The primary physical medium of the word—sound—is itself an exteriorization of a physical interior, setting up reverberations in other physical interiors."

Use of the mouth, tongue, ear, larynx, and other physical apparatus to engage in communication is, of necessity, part of the presence of the word among the living. While the eye is the gateway for visual stimuli, it provides immediate, but only a very partial, knowledge, for vision takes in brute facts, particularly as the eye responds to an image. Contrary to the idea of sight as the decisive sense, "the visual world is pointillist. Images are points which take on value only when reassembled, so that they acquire an identity as part of a total picture" (Ellul, 1985, p. 9). Thus, whether reading words on a page or viewing images on a screen, what the eye sees must be interpreted within a wider context, particularly as part of the spectacle of culture that is promulgated in its use of symbols.[1] As social theorist and philosopher Jacques Ellul (1985) explains,

> The spectacle-oriented society makes a spectacle of itself, transforming all into spectacle and paralyzing everything by this means. Such a society forces the involuntary and unconscious actor into the role of spectator and congeals through visualization everything that is not technique. (p. 115)

This view of contemporary culture has been addressed in numerous ways throughout interdisciplinary literature, sometimes being referred to as "eye-culture," a means of pointing to the growing dominance of visual modality for learning, perceiving, and being in this world.[2] Being social-

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[1] Much diluting and misrepresenting of reality takes place through the acquisition of images. Guy Debord's conceptualization of "the spectacle" is noted here. But the spectacle is more than merely the collection of images foisted upon the naked eye, misrepresenting reality. It is a way of seeing the world, perceiving reality based on a grammar that is visualist. "The spectacle presents itself as something enormously positive, indisputable and inaccessible. It says nothing more than that which appears is good, that which is good appears. The attitude which it demands in principle is passive acceptance which in fact it already obtained by its manner of appearing without reply, by its monopoly of appearance" (Debord, 1967, np).

[2] For an enlightening and important explanation of a visually-oriented culture see Boorstin (1961).

ized into a consumer-spectator mode of being, the person of late modern civilization can hardly help but perceive what he or she *sees* as the truth, for the eye enables us to see things as they are, in stark formality. Conversely, the spoken word "ushers us into a different dimension: relationship with other living beings, with persons" (Ellul, 1985, p. 14).

Because the revolution in digital media has prompted entirely new patterns of daily communication that are convenient, mobile, and increasingly immediate, the way that relationships evolve and are maintained is rapidly changing. The change encompasses all aspects of life but most directly affects the practice and art of communication, particularly as regards the shift in relationship dynamics. Additionally, and among so many other things, the new media landscape includes a shift in the processing and interpretation of individual thought patterns and in the actual function of language itself. These changes do not necessarily equal progress, nor are they all beneficial for relational communication. Devoid of human presence, conversations are often reduced to truncated versions of what they could be, providing a veneer that seems to be relational, but bespeaks sparseness and fragility. Interlocutors may understand the meaning of a quick retort in the form of an acronym or abbreviation such as "LOL" or "JK," but these substitutes for language do little to advance the beauty of the human exchange or its importance in developing relationship richness.[3] Rather, they often lead to confusion, reducing reasonable human conversation to gut-level reactions or barely discernible single word answers such as a grunt or rapid-fire instant message that more resembles a street sign than a rational human exchange. Further, meaning is increasingly compromised as digital devices no longer maintain status as "new," but become part of the invisible media of our day. As this occurs, conversations conducted through screens become the norm.

This type of micro-screening[4] offers challenges to relational communication that are immense but often overlooked in the wake of an overly optimistic acceptance of all new media. In light of these changes, this essay will explore some of the dynamics of a communication environment that is pervasively digital and mobile. In it, I seek to accomplish a very modest goal. First, we will discuss the significance of our soundscapes, particularly as they pertain to the human ability to be in relational. Next, we will consider the effectiveness of modes of communication behavior associated with personal mobile media**,** particularly as this behavior usurps the natural quiet places in the environment. Finally, we will analyze the several aspects of the spoken word that pertain to relational intimacy and explore the necessity of human presence as a key relational factor in an increasingly technological society. Ultimately, this article is about the prospect of a world in which human presence and the acoustics of solitude are increasingly deemed superfluous.

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[3] LOL stands for "laugh out loud." JK stands for "just kidding."

[4] There is the silver screen, the small screen, and now the micro-screen, and although the word "screening" generally refers to viewing a film, throughout this paper I will refer to communication through personal mobile media as "micro-screening."

The New Communication Environment

A soundscape that is free from the clutter and clang of post-industrialism's badge of success (read: noise pollution!) is becoming increasingly difficult to find.[5] Even miles beyond city traffic, machinery, and the countless digital technologies that tool our world, there are fewer places that remain free to experience quiet and solitude. Places for coherent conversation or reflection are disappearing like an endangered species. In restaurants, where the ear must filter out conversations from other dining patrons, televisions are displayed in every corner (sometimes every booth!). In elevators, offices, and waiting rooms, music and "news" are piped in, contributing to the layers of masked sound that fall upon our ears. Along with all this, use of personal mobile media in public places contributes greatly to the masking of natural soundscapes. Adding layers of sound to the decibel level are the ambient sounds of equipment hum along with the numerous peripheral conversations taking place in public places.

Instead of being able to find external quiet places or being able to focus on a quiet interior, the mind is constantly processing stimuli, giving up the numerous micro-moments of "pause" or "timeout" necessary to maintain conversational flow and coherence. Without a proper amount of time to recover from the informational ballast of a data-saturated society, the central nervous system is increasingly fatigued and unable to cope with the normal give-and-take in everyday communication behavior. Even when a quiet place is available for conversation it is often thwarted. This is due to many factors, a prime one being that media of communication foster a new kind of thinking and knowing.

What is important to recognize here is that it is impossible to enjoy the benefits of digital communication without acknowledging the changes that are problematic. As Frank Dance (2008) explains, "A fundamental media ecology tenet is that any medium transforms that which it mediates. Each time we effect a transformation of speech into another medium, such as from interior speech to external handwriting, there is an impact in the way we know ourselves and our surroundings and others" (p. 39). The full impact is not immediately known, nor will it be completely until that moment in the future when the winners and losers of technological innovation have risen to the fore. Yet, some of the immediate social impact is already clear and is becoming more convincing as research in these aspects of media and acoustic ecology are advanced.

Hearing and Focus

T o begin, it is clear that the acoustic backdrop of many of our conversational situations is being compromised. Studies in acoustic ecology suggest that the natural soundscape is changing more quickly than human beings and many animals can adapt. Current statistics measuring auditory malfunction suggest that contrary to the belief that hearing loss is a problem for older people, there is an exponential rise in hearing loss among the young due to excessive leisure time noise. In fact, as many as 65 percent of adults between the ages of 18 and 45 suffer hearing loss due to the increase in noise levels in our environment (Eggemann, Koester, & Zorowka, 2002). That we are adapting is not a surprise. Adaptability is a part of the very definition of what it means to be human. As we adapt, we process volumes of external and internal stimuli much more quickly than in the past and, as a result, are increasingly becoming a race of multi-taskers. What we are losing is focus. In some studies the rise in rates of ADD and ADHD

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[5] According to R. Murray Schafer (1977), a soundscape is the natural acoustic sound in the environment such as a waterfall, river, or ocean. It is further called "sound imperialism" when the noise of networks, satellites, and machinery override the natural sounds of life.

have been attributed to a fractured focus among those using digital, visual-oriented media, particularly in the extended use of electronic gaming.[6] Dr. Elias Aboujaoude, director of Stanford University's Impulse Control Disorders Clinic at Stanford University, has been researching in the field of attention science and compulsive disorders for many years. He suggests that Twitter and all other personal mobile media help foment the growing tide of attention problems. In an interview, he said:

> If our attention span constricts to the point where we can only take information in 140-character sentences, then that doesn't bode too well for our future. The more we become used to just sound bites and tweets, the less patient we will be with more complex, more meaningful information. And I do think we might lose the ability to analyze things with any depth and nuance. Like any skill, if you don't use it, you lose it. (Evangelista, 2009)

Distractibility and Social Skills

What this change means for the quality and depth of relationships, with both others and ourselves, is the issue at hand. The more we allow our conversations to take place as we are multi-tasking, the more we normalize distraction. Danikel Akst (2010), a *New York Times* technology writer, expounds on the historic relationship between developments in our communication environment and the problem of distractibility:

> Distractibility, sad to say, is the human condition, and probably evolved at a time when—hey, is that a tiger?!—it was a survival adaptation. But if we can't do anything about human nature, we can control the situations in which we find ourselves. Wily Odysseus understood this when he ordered his men to bind him to their ship's mast lest he quite literally go overboard as a result of the Sirens' seductive song. Modern-day computer users can make like Odysseus with programs such as Freedom, a free download for Macs that lets you bar yourself from the Internet until you reboot—not a huge barrier but perhaps just enough of a hurdle, and one that provides an embarrassing time-out in which to contemplate what you're about to do. (np)

While individual choices concerning use of our digital devices vary, recent statistics point to the fact that once we begin using our iPhones, Blackberries, and other personal mobile media, we easily become dependent upon them, and, no matter how accustomed one is to the constant connection, no matter how well we manage it, the new media environment dramatically changes our social patterns, greatly impacting the way we conduct our relationships. How so? There are numerous ways. One example lies in the arena of politeness and public civility. Have you ever been the recipient of an invitation to meet for coffee or have dinner and the other person is interrupted by incoming calls or text messages? This might be the one of the most apparent examples of rude behavior, but it often happens unintentionally. In fact, perhaps we've not only been on the receiving end of this type of behavior, but sometimes find ourselves caught in the

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[6] Although pesticide exposure, lead, and many other causes for Attention Deficit Disorder have been offered as possibilities for the exponential rise of these disorders, more research indicates that the addiction to (or preoccupation with) digital gaming is a contributing aspect.

same trap. We forget to turn our cellphone off and an important call comes in. There it is—an image appearing on our micro-screen. Should we ignore it? Perhaps, but what if it is an emergency? What if I'll miss *something important?* These are the thoughts that muddle with our minds and tamper with our staid social protocols.

In some ways, fascination with our media cuts us off from the thicker context of relationships all around us and increasingly diminishes everyday civility. Whether at home or in public places, if our eyes are fixed on a screen we lessen our possibilities of interacting with others in more informal situations, such as with people we might meet in the public square, on the bus, or in the supermarket line. As we close ourselves up in our communication tools, we create a bubble around us that disassociates us from other human beings, shutting us off from the potential of knowing them, or at the very least, treating them as individuals rather than objects. The individual sitting in the waiting room may be a stranger, but she is a person, too. The new communication environment is immediately and violently affecting the way in which our relationships are conducted, developed, and maintained, as well as the way we think about our core identity. At risk, as well, is the sanity and sense of well-being in everyday life. Ellul (1964), writing in *The Technological Society*, perceived this risk over fifty years ago, and explained the push as part of the rhythm of efficiency that has been at work in our highly technicized, industrial society:

> There is no longer respite for reflecting or choosing or adapting oneself, or for acting or wishing or pulling oneself together. The rule of life is: No sooner said than done. Life has become a racecourse … a succession of objective events which drag us along and lead us astray without anywhere affording us the possibility of standing apart, taking stock, and ceasing to act. (p. 330)

Seeking the Sound of Silence

The place for solitude in an active life may seem out of touch with the real needs of a workaday world, but the lack of it does not negate human need for quiet, solitude, contemplation. Noise, then, rather than silence, is rapidly becoming our new "natural" environment. Immersed in such an information-rich, media-saturated habitat, the acceleration of noise—both external and internal—is rising exponentially. Instead of the rich robes of silence set as the backdrop for dialogue, conversational space is becoming something of an anomaly. One result of this is that conversations occur while we are on the move and at great distance; increasingly, we are living out our relationships on-the-run.

The most recent changes in the communication environment present an entirely new set of challenges in regard to what it means to be *together.* Are we together while Skyping? Are we together while using email in asynchronous "conversation"? Or are we together while texting, sharing thoughts synchronously? The relational ramifications are many, but perhaps less apparent are the way these changes in our communication patterns alter perception of what it means to be present. Today, with approximately 4.6 billon cellphone subscribers throughout the world speaking into the air, the mobility factor is not an insignificant one. Along with the convenience and other added benefits of this new mobility, the presence of the other is becoming inconsequential, or so it might appear. Conversation proliferates, albeit from remote locations. In fact, as we walk through public spaces, one may say there is something of a renaissance of the spoken word, but the distancing of human relationships is exacerbated due to increased mediation of the voice and the increasing cultural demise of physical presence. Finally, the change in communication environment creates a greater fascination with, and ability to do, many things at once. Multi-

tasking, in fact, seems not only to have become the new expectation, but as a type of human behavior in the United States it has risen to the level of virtue.

Multi-tasking Relationships

P lease give me your partial attention." Can you imagine saying that to your spouse or a friend? Perhaps in jest, but does anyone expect anything less than the full attention of those with whom we are in relationship? One of the most fundamental elements of relationship maintenance is that it requires adequate time, energy, and focus, but when the practice of engaging in several activities at once morphs into the mentality of multi-tasking, it does nothing to help foster intimacy. The electronic flood of phone calls, billboards, texts, and emails that deluge our days all take time to manage, which takes time away from the primary relationships. The human brain cannot be "always on" and expect to manage our relationships well. We need quiet, rest, sleep, leisure—at regular intervals (Webster, 2008). The brain needs time to recover and repair from the stress of daily activities. So explains Dr. William C. Dement, a psychiatrist and the founder of Sanford University's Sleep Clinic, who suggests that most Americans suffer from chronic sleep deprivation. Dement's clinical studies show that even short-term sleep deprivation "leads to a foggy brain, worsened vision, impaired driving, and trouble remembering." None of these problems help maintain solid relationships, nor do these physical abnormalities foster positive mental health and well-being. Whether between friends, spouses, or parent and child, multi-tasking diminishes relationship. The fact is, the much-lauded quality of multi-tasking is grossly misunderstood. The ability to throw clothes in a washer with a baby on your hip or prepare a meal while chatting with friends is multi-tasking. This is a far cry from attempting to explore three Internet sites while giving directions to a friend on the phone, listening to music in the background while exchanging instant messages with three other people on an open computer screen. This type of interaction with media is just that: interaction *with media*, not a person.

Cognitive scientists are finding that individual perception about multi-tasking skills is not often accurate. While some of the relationship information that we glean from our expanding social circles may be processed rather easily by the extraordinary capacity of our brains to filter out unimportant details, the utter magnitude of information to be processed by individuals is unprecedented, and it requires much more time to process than in the past. Because the human brain is wired to adapt, we do, but that doesn't mean that there are not countless mishaps, accidents, and side effects that occur from lack of paying attention. The erosion of attention is becoming a complex problem that is nearly epidemic in proportion. An example of this comes from a study done in 2008 in which it was found that over 1000 "walking" accidents occur each year from people not paying attention to an oncoming car or telephone pole (Richtel, 2010a). A growing number of prominent neuroscientists, such as Adam Gazzaley of the University of California in San Francisco, are concerned about the waning attention spans and effects these media will have on the brain. Dr. Gazzaley explains: "The nonstop interactivity is one of the most significant shifts ever in the human environment. We are exposing our brains to an environment and asking them to do things we weren't necessarily evolved to do . . . We know already there are consequences" (Richtel, 2010b).

Aside from the physical and psychological consequences, there are social concerns. What this type of communication behavior leads to is something communication researchers have been calling *continuous partial attention*, or CPA. It is a way of being busy and interacting with one's

media environment rather than relating.[7] Over time, this misuse of our media may be particularly problematic, for as we become more accustomed to giving partial attention to people, we lose the important focus necessary to truly connect and commune with others. Instead of an exception, partial attention becomes a way of life, affecting the workplace, the home, the community, as well as our most significant relationships.

Along with believing that we can multi-task our relationships, several other unexpected challenges arise from our new environment of disembodied interpersonal communication. One of these challenges is found in dealing with the expanded reach of social influence and the increased relationship options they bring (Interview with Gregory Reynolds, 2008). Time spent managing our social networking sites, emails, websites, discussion lists, tweets, and blogs certainly affords new opportunities for connection with others, but as we embrace these media our lives are apt to become overwhelmed with managing them. Currently, 400 million people are actively using the social networking site known as *Facebook*. The average user has 130 friends.[8] Now, instead of maintaining one or two close friends and remembering the birthdays of several brothers and sisters, our reach has expanded to many times that amount. Sparseness rather than richness becomes the tenor of our circle of social relationships. Stress, guilt, and over-busyness are the results of attempting to maintain more relationships than time allows.

Long before the emergence of digital social networks, Kenneth Gergen (1991), social psychologist and Swarthmore University professor, referred to the expanding circle of social relations as "social saturation," suggesting that this late-modern phenomenon presents a crisis in intimacy and commitment. He explains:

> Many try to develop 'best friends' within their communities, who can be fully trusted or relied upon during a time of need. Yet it becomes difficult indeed to define a relationship as 'closest' or 'best' when for weeks, even months the participants are both in motion. Both may long for lazy and undirected hours, when each nuance of experience is examined with careful attention, and chance comments open new vistas of fascination. But consider the difficulties of locating such hours, when you take your work home with you almost every night, you know you must have more exercise, you visit your parents on the weekend, a spouse and/or children are craving for more quality time, your wardrobe desperately needs to be brought up to date, your support group absorbs your Thursday evenings, and there are numerous books, games, concerts, and exhibits that are not to be missed. Under these conditions, meandering moments are seldom found, and because this is so, the very concept of 'closest' or 'best' friend undergoes a sea change. Rather than a communion of souls it becomes an occasional and compressed 'catch-up.' From a traditionalist viewpoint, we lose the capacity for genuine friendship. (p. 175)

To really grasp the idea of social saturation, we might consider the image of a sponge that needs to be squeezed. It has already taken in too much water. If we continue to wipe the kitchen counter, its saturation capacity will ultimately make more of a mess than what we started with.

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[7] Continuous Partial Attention (CPA) is a phrase coined by Linda Stone in 1997. It suggests communication behavior that is "always-on," scanning, scrolling, seeking to know and be known. It has become increasingly common to live this way in the Internet generation. See *Business Week Report,* July 24, 2008.
[8] FaceBook Press Page. Available online: http://www.facebook.com/press/info.php?statistics

This is much like many of our lives: over-full, over-stimulated, *overwhelmed*. Again and again, the word *overwhelmed* is used when speaking with people from every walk of life. The more time we seem to have because of the efficiency of our digital devices, the more activity and people we draw into our circle of life. More and more people are experiencing the paltry degeneration of their primary relationships because of social saturation.

The countless new points of connection seem to produce more stress instead of less, and tax those most significant, primary relationships that are most cherished. While these same connections may be quite enjoyable, they ultimately reduce the time we spend relating to the most important people in our lives. I can't help thinking of one man I interviewed when studying the effect of early simulated game worlds that allow individuals to create a new identity in virtual spheres. He enjoyed *Sim City*, *The Sims,* and *Everquest* because, in his words, the games allowed him to escape and "sort of reinvent myself." This newlywed spent a couple of hours a day after work interacting with other online gaming enthusiasts through his avatar. He had so much fun relaxing with his new "friends" that occasionally he called in sick to work so he could spend more time in the virtual world he created online. Ultimately, he ended up spending fourteen hours a day interacting with people he would never meet, but . . . it was fun. Within a year his job was gone and so was his wife.

The Bias of the Spoken Word

Man communicates with his whole body, and yet the word is his primary medium. Communication, like knowledge itself, flowers in speech. (Ong, 1967, p. 1)

The importance of the spoken word cannot be overstated. Its presence is curious, emerging from something far more significant than the need to convey a message or represent reality. The sound of a person's voice is essential in communicating mood, meaning, and context. It is integral to the development of relationship and community. In terms of relationship, the spoken word is vital and often more alluring than physical attraction. In fact, as face-to-face conversation between two people begins to flow, the exchange has the potential to become something that is extremely powerful. As communication theorist Frank Dance (2008) explains, it is "language [that] fuses with speech into spoken language and participates in speech's place as the staging ground for all other media. If spoken language were to disappear there would be nothing to mediate" (p. 43). Before electronic media, print, and writing, there was speech. It is the foundation of all communication. "Everything is given birth by the word" (Ellul, 1985, p. 53). Thus, in spite of the distance between two people speaking through digitized screens (such as with the cellphone), the sound of the other's voice remains the strength of that interaction, something that is distinctively missing in communicating via much of our personal mobile media, such as text-messaging and mobile email.

When two people sit down to speak with one another, an inherent bias toward relationship exists, for the sound of one's voice comes from deep within and reaches deep into the interior of the other. It may then be said that our ability to know another person is directly related to our ability to be with that one, communicating through the spoken word rather than the mere exchange of letters read on a page or a screen. While communicating through the written word can most certainly bring about meaning, the written word depends on vision, which captures the word and freezes it in time and space. "Sight reveals only surfaces. It can never get to an interior as an interior, but must always treat it as somehow an exterior" (Ong, 1967, p. 74).

Certainly, all human communication is not lodged in the spoken word, but within the primal nature of speech—from the nascent cry of a newborn to the ecstasy of orgasmic love—there exists a symbiotic relationship between being and speaking. Among other dynamics, the vocal mechanism creates an echo of the self reaching out to another person. The reverberating effect creates a situation in which the possibility of intimacy—or relational richness—is enhanced. In fact, the potential for intimacy to develop when the spoken word is in full force is magnified, for it is "one's voice that bespeaks presence" (Dance, 2008, p. 38). That said, one may legitimately raise the point that the voice can be heard nearly as well through the telephone or cellphone. It is a point well taken, yet, in using these mediating devices the missing aspects of physical presence drape a dark cloak of unknowing over conversation. The spoken word, however, because of its distinctive connection to physical presence, creates a pronounced opportunity to go beyond the substance of the message into the realm of mystery. Of the spoken word, Jacques Ellul (1985) explains:

> We are in the presence of an infinitely and unexpectedly rich tool, so that the tiniest phrase unleashes an entire polyphonic gamut of meaning. The ambiguity of language, even its ambivalence and its contradiction, between the moment it is spoken and the moment it is received produce extremely intense activities. Without such activities, we would be ants or bees, and our drama and tragedy would quickly be dried up and empty. Between the moment of speech and the moment of reception are born symbol, metaphor, and analogy. (p. 19)

Apprehension of the mystery of *being* is not the least of the issues that arise as a result of our new digital communication landscape, for when the inherent and primordial status of the spoken word as mediating act in human communication is eclipsed, meaning is compromised. Such a speech act is necessary to arrive at the fullness of meaning.

Though email, text-messaging, social networks, and the plethora of digital devices allow us to be virtually tethered to one another, the greater distance between the word and the presence of the other atomizes relationship, dissipating the richness into a thin layer of misty residue. What is this residue? It is *the appearance* of relationship, or the semblance of it, that appears to substitute for the substance of strong, life-giving mutuality. Instead of our digital devices helping to increase longevity and richness, contemporary relationships that might be described as "stable" or "sturdy" seem to be disappearing into a black hole. Ellul (1985) brings clarity here in his prescient statement about the need for an anchored, human presence in communication:

> Language deals with connotations and overtones. It takes its place in the center of an infinitely delicate spider's web, whose central structure is fine, rigorous, and dense. As you move away from the center, the web becomes larger and distended, until it reaches incoherence, at its edge, where it sends off threads in every direction. Some of these threads go a great distance, until they arrive at the invisible spots where the web is anchored. (p. 18)

Although the World Wide Web was not yet a reality when he wrote these words, Ellul's description of language implies a need that carries through in all human communication. The denseness, or richness, of relationship finds its strength in an anchored place from which to communicate to the other. Without the anchored self it is difficult, even impossible, to maintain a relationship of

intimacy and longevity. Without the anchor of human presence, the prospect of meaning inches away and relationship dissipates. Fondness, affection, even deep love may continue, but the reality of relationship sustains little hope for continuance.

Along with the diminishment of meaning, challenges to message coherence are magnified when the human presence is eclipsed. Without embodied presence, the nuance of meaning made available through paralanguage is gone. No longer can the tone, pitch, volume, or pace of the voice contribute to the overall meaning of a sentence. In addition, kinesics, haptics, and the sense of place—all these nonverbal cues are missing when conversing through a screen. This is vital missing information. What is communicated through the eyes, the posture, or subtle movements of the body is all lost when physical presence is absent.[9] Important insight into the other is gained and meaning is advanced, often through the combination of the nonverbal communication cues stated above. How else is insight *into* the other apprehended other than actually being *with* the other?

In describing the inexplicable moment of communion when two distinct souls come together and connect on a level that is far more intimate than the mere exchange of information, Jacques Ellul provides some insight as to the vast difference between texting—or talking on a cellphone—and sitting face-to-face in an exchange of life together. In the extended but quite worthy passage below, Ellul (1985) explains why the spoken word is wedded to insight and intimacy:

> It is not the sum of the understood fragments, not the slow and tortuous march of a gradual and complicated unfolding, nor is it the triumphant QED of a solved algebra problem. Instead, this moment of insight is an inspiration which reveals in an instant the meaning of the entire message the other person was trying to give me. Everything is reduced to this sparkling moment which makes order out of the rest of the imbroglio and finds the way out of the maze. In a single instant the entire idea becomes clear: the other person's argument ceases being mere rhetoric, and his symbols and metaphors are no longer pointless. In a flash that some have compared to a kind of vision, communication between two intelligent beings has taken place. (p. 21)

The Mobility Factor

The mobility factor introduces many other dynamics to the communication landscape, among which is the change in environment. Media theorists Gumpert and Drucker (2003) point out that along with the facilities and construction of a physical environment, the electronic, auditory, and typographical dissemination of information constitute an overall "communication environment." The fact that our digital media are now portable has an incalculable effect on both the physical environment (in terms of noise) and the social environment (in terms of distractibility). Perhaps the most immediately apparent effect is that there is much more noise filling the acoustic space. As a result of improved connectivity and a virtual dissolution of the distance between us, there are voices, ring tones, and beeps filling our public spaces. Everywhere, people are talking. On the street, in public transportation, supermarkets, and beaches—the level of ambient noise is increasing (Wrightson, 2002).

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[9] Even in the wake of video-conferencing software such as Skype, there exists a lack.

What is occurring in this early part of the 21st century is similar to the shift that occurred in ancient Greece during the overlapping period between oral culture and writing. Similar to the way that the ancient Greek dialogues of Plato were part of that transitional period, today's mobile computing represents a time of transition between print culture and the new digital landscape.[10] Along with the promise and creativity of a new way to communicate, the convenience and immediacy of mobile computing is disrupting the way relationships are managed very much in the same way that the "economy of a world of sound was violently disrupted by the alphabet" (Ong, 1967, p. 42). For many people it is still important to "find a place" to sit down and have a good conversation, but this practice is eroding quickly, as well. This lack of designated place for our conversations is evoking more change than the simple convenience of being "in touch" with those in remote locations. Among the many other aspects of change, communicating primarily through text and other externalities fosters a knowing through simulacra rather than a knowing through real presence.[11]

Human Presence

Speech fills the infinite gap that separates us."(Ellul, 1985, p. 17)

Communicating via cellphone provides the foundation for spoken language and may be one of the main factors in the immense popularity and immediate ubiquity of the mobile phone. With the introduction of Skype and other video-conferencing software, another element is added to the conversational experience. Now, one can simultaneously see the other through a screen while hearing the voice. With each additional mode, the semblance of presence is enhanced. All this said, the noetic structures of speech such as handwriting, text-messaging, gestures, facial expressions, and other means of nonverbal communication deeply affect how we know what we know, and, while the permutations of knowledge about the other will undoubtedly change according to the medium used, face-to-face communication still provides the most overlapping and inclusive knowledge of the other. Primary knowledge—that which is ascertained through physical presence—is the most notable and trustworthy means by which one may be known. For intimacy in relationship to advance, we need to touch one another, observe one another in action, and look deeply in one another's eyes. *How* we know others—as well as what we know about them, and ourselves—is nothing less than critical to meaning-making and relational intimacy. Thus, as the pervasiveness of our digital gadgets expands and our virtual experiences increase, the need for solitude becomes even more important. Just as sleep deprivation creates a compromise to our immune system, the lack of quiet in our communication environment compromises our relationships. But what can be done? Is it possible to unplug? Is it necessary to resist the rising tide of remote relationship? Is it even possible to resist?

Solitude is necessary in order to come to peace with one's self. It is essential, in fact, when trying to make sense of our feelings and concerns, and it has deep, residing effect on how we relate to others. Without a proper amount of solitude in our lives there is little time to reflect, or even consider, what the other might be thinking or feeling. It is in solitude that we are able to

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[10] For a thorough treatment of this shift in communication practice and all of its implications, see Havelock (1963) and Ong (1967).

[11] Virtual relationships have been taking place on the Internet via dating sites, gaming sites, and discussion lists. Much research has been advanced in this area of communication study, particularly in the context of *Second Life,* a virtual community in which people create avatars to represent who they are and relate to other avatars in simulated relationship. For more information see Avashti (2006).

peel away the layered masks we wear and come to a place of self revelation where we "see" ourselves in true light, for we cannot know who we are without spending time reflecting, contemplating, thinking about who we are in relation to others. It is there, springing from regular solitude and silence, that we are better prepared to bring an authentic self to the table of relationship. Without it there is little room for intimacy. These interior activities are natural and essential to the flourishing of the human soul, but they are thwarted daily, not only by the psychological means of self-protection we exhibit by closing ourselves off from others, but by the need to make a living and exist in the world. Indeed, today, these very human needs are exacerbated by the deluge of data that comes our way through our personal mobile media and overall communication environment.

But intimacy is somewhat enigmatic, for it means different levels of relationship for different individuals, does it not? This is particularly so in generational differences as well as relationships that are intercultural. Yet one thing is clear about the richness of relationship. When we have it, we know it. Intimacy involves the inexplicable mystery of truly knowing another human being. To experience it, we must be intentional about our communication choices, deciding to turn off the cellphone or stow it away unless there is a specific purpose; being more respectful of others in the public sphere; keeping our private conversations, private. Ultimately, the choice is ours.

Faced with the need to communicate more effectively and deeply with others, we can choose daily to be fully present. The fact is, relationships are not tasks on a to-do list. We are not our machines. People need the presence of other human beings. The acoustics of solitude involve a quiet inner terrain, and this is only possible as one makes the daily choice to detach from the world of sound and stimulation. Is it yet within our reach to turn up the acoustics of solitude, but one day it may be less possible. While places of solitude may still be found in the vast open spaces of American plains, deserts or the deep woods, the cities and suburbs suffer from a cacophonic deluge. We need the richness of regional soundscapes! Subsumed by the din of noisy crowds, machinery, and other environmental intrusions, the spoken word hangs like the lingering, last leaf of autumn. In so many ways it seems to await a final gust from the north, dangling in the wind of the technophilic love affair with digitality. The antidote? Find the quiet places in the busyness of life; protect them. Seek to be *with* others. Determine to be fully engaged. Enjoy being fully present. Speak.

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