

The Effect of Those *Not Present* 2008

What happens when an environment is purged of *the interruption of those not present*, thus giving the occupants the opportunity to interact, solely, with one another?

There was a time when this was commonplace, but no more. Consider how many of our daily interactions are affected by the influence of those “not present”: the news we receive, the entertainment we watch or listen to, the commercial “pitches” we ingest (mostly unsolicited), the communications we both send and receive by all kinds of devices, the endless list of things to do that have been imposed upon us by others who are no longer present; school assignments, work tasks, deadlines of all kinds, appointments.

How many times have I been annoyed with someone, simply because they are present and my mind is busy contemplating something I must do, to satisfy someone who is not present. How many times are those present the source of annoyance because they are interrupting my interacting with someone not present; someone on the phone, on the TV, on a recording I’m listening to, in a text I’m reading, in a movie I’m watching.

Surely something must be lost when our normal daily transactions with each other are carried out in such an environment. I have seen an interesting phenomenon occur at both children’s camp and family camp; when human beings are given the chance to interact with one another without having to compete with those *not present*. A few discoveries are made.

Actual human beings are far more complicated and hence more interesting than virtual ones. Actual human beings make demands that virtual ones do not, and those demands require me to physically and intellectually interact with them in ways that create a depth of relationship that I do not receive from virtual ones.

When I interact with a fellow human at a distance, through a medium (of any kind, including these words you are reading) I become virtual. I am but one of a number of not-present individuals that populate your mind.

However, when I’m standing in front of you, or holding your hand, or helping you into a boat, over a log on the trail, reaching for an object on a shelf that’s out of your reach, *or you’re doing any of the above for me*, we have an opportunity to interact in a way that only humans can do. We can share the physical environment and an intellectual one *that we mutually create!* This is an art that requires effort, an effort that virtual interactions do not require. During the best of virtual interactions we trade data. During the least of them, we either send or receive it. The virtual interaction is at best two dimensional, at worst one.

Only during actual, in your presence (uninterrupted by those not present) interactions can we mutually create three dimension relationships that are bound by you, me and the hard edged realities of this place and time. We have been hardwired to need these labor intensive relationships, but we have also been hardwired with an aversion to hard labor. When we accede to our proclivity for the second we deny ourselves a necessary part of our nature.

When do we learn to master the art of these labor intensive relationships, which once mastered are no longer laborious? It happens during childhood, during that handful of years when our brains are programmed with lines of code that will affect the very “way” we will think for the rest of our lives.

Throughout every day we and our children have countless encounters with real people, but sadly, most, if not all, of them are conducted in competition with those not present. To enjoy and profit from these most human of interactions requires a kind of intellectual privacy that is increasingly stolen by those not present.

To resist the electronically augmented power of the virtual intruder requires a discipline or power of the will that most of us have lost. We have become Pavlovian in our response to the call of the virtual “Siren”.

Each summer, during children’s camp and again during family camp, I marvel as both children and adults discover or rediscover the wonder of *each other*. What is it that drives this phenomenon of discovery — probably a simple thing. At camp,

for a brief while, we exclude those not present. This exclusion does not require discipline or act of the will on the part of the camper; we do it for them.

How do we do that? We simply *turn off* the means by which those not present interrupt. The result is nothing short of miraculous; every person present becomes someone of consequence, not imagined, not theoretical, neither future nor past, but actual right now.

Caveat Emptor, the difference, once experienced, can be habit forming, hopefully for a lifetime.

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