

True Connectivity

WE ARE LIVING in a paradoxical moment. We are technically more connected than at any other point in history, but our technological connectivity itself often leaves us feeling emotionally disconnected or isolated.

Even as we hold in our hands the tools and data to trace patterns of interdependence around the globe, there is still a great distance between what we know of the world and our emotional engagement with that knowledge. We are discovering that we are far more interconnected than we had previously realized, but our way of feeling and living in the world has not caught up with our new understanding.

To close that gap, we can first explore the factors that are obstacles to actually feeling more connected to the world we encounter online. Then we can look for ways to use technological connectivity more wisely so as to take advantage of the opportunities it does offer.

The information we find online tends to stress what is unique or different about people, focusing on disparities in the material conditions of our lives, or on religious and cultural differences. This leads our attention away from what we have in common and can leave us unable to see, let alone feel, our connectedness to people we view on our screens.

Reflecting on your own experiences can help make clear how this works. Chances are you live in a comfortably furnished home, set the temperature exactly as you want it, and open the door any time you like to a refrigerator full of food you enjoy. You can also surf the Internet from a comfortable chair and view images of people who have no homes or whose shelter is made of bits of plastic and cardboard. You can watch videos of their struggle to find enough food and clean water to drink. As you do so, you may feel some pity or sympathy as you observe their plight on the screen, but you are likely to feel that you are looking at them from across a great distance.

A rift opens in our minds, separating us from people whose living conditions differ substantially from ours. When we pay so much attention to the outer conditions that shape people's lives, we end up focusing on what distinguishes us, overlooking what unites us. This can contribute to a sense of distance or separateness from others. The same sense of distance between us and them opens up in the case of people with different cultures and religious backgrounds. I am not speaking here of physical distance but emotional and mental.

Viewing others through the lens of interdependence helps us see that we are not separate from people on the other side of these seeming gaps. We are capable of seeing causal connections that link us to others who appear to be remote from us, even if such links are not visible to the naked eye. For example, we can review the ample evidence and arguments that show that those who have less economic power provide the labor that keeps down the cost of living and fuels the material prosperity of those who have more. This means we can identify ties between our meal and the field workers who harvested our vegetables and factory workers who manufactured our dishes. Yet having this intellectual knowledge of our connection to them does not automatically make us feel personally close to them, especially when the outer conditions of their lives seem so different from our own.

We are in many ways creatures of habit. If we live within certain

conditions long enough, they come to seem natural to us. But if we had lived in different conditions, they would seem equally natural. Looking at the cultural, religious, or material conditions that others have become habituated to may make us feel that they must be totally different from us, but we are just mistaking something circumstantial for something essential. It is largely an accident of our birth and our life circumstances that we have come to find certain conditions familiar and others alien or distant. It is not an indication of anything essentially other or different about us.

Beyond any superficial circumstantial factors that differentiate us, all living beings share a much deeper common ground, as I discussed in the previous chapter. Buddhism identifies this deeper ground as the wish to be happy and the longing for freedom from suffering. This fundamental inner condition lies at the very core of our existence. Our apparent physical and circumstantial differences are relatively unimportant and shallow, compared to the more important—and much more foundational—level of reality on which we all stand.

Focusing on this deeper level can help us to access a sense of closeness and shared experience—of all being in it together. With this as our starting point, we can explore our particular conditions without experiencing them as a gulf that separates us.

GOING BEYOND VIRTUAL REALITY

Communications technology has great potential as a tool to bring us closer. The Internet can help us discover that others are like us, and that we are not as alone as we think. It can enable people to connect with others who suffer from similar conditions and find comfort and support in online communities. However, to fulfill the full potential such tools offer, we must use them wisely. Otherwise they can easily end up leaving us further disconnected from one another and from reality.

When topics and events are presented online in a way that highlights what is out of the ordinary, and on top of that receive disproportionate attention, this skews our vision of reality overall. A hypersensitivity to differences desensitizes us to our universal shared condition. Such exaggeration of anomalies can have several harmful effects. One is, as I mentioned, that we can find it hard to identify with people whose experiences we encounter online, because we feel excessively distant and different.

Another is that we end up presenting ourselves as something other than we are when we compete with others in social media. We may be selective about what we share of ourselves in other social contexts as well, but our interactions online are stripped of all the nonverbal clues others use in interpreting what we show of ourselves. The complete lack of direct contact creates a sort of vacuum in which we can easily create an artificial persona. This leads to inauthentic relationships with others, and with ourselves.

In my view, in navigating the online world we need to be very aware of this role of illusion in our virtual connections. This is the case for the information that the Internet delivers but also for the kinds of experiences it offers us. The social aspects of connecting electronically can be especially tricky.

Whether through text messages, sites like Facebook, or other forms of social media, we often reach out because we want someone to talk to and engage with. Yet we are connecting as virtual selves with virtual others, and there are many intermediate layers that we must pass through to “connect” online. When we interact with others online, we do so as an illusory electronic self, interacting with illusory electronic versions of other people.

It is quite strange, really. We see pixels on a screen and hear the digital reproduction of someone’s voice, and we think, “I see them, they see me, and we can talk.” But when you get right down to it, there is no one there. It is an electronic and therefore artificial repre-

sentation we are gazing at and talking to. This may be an entertaining way to pass our time, but when we are in real emotional pain, these electronic connections fall far short of the comfort and intimacy we yearn for. It is extremely difficult for technology to transmit the basic human warmth that we all need, and that we especially seek in our moments of pain.

When you are hurt, sometimes you just want someone to hug you. A flat screen cannot hold your hand and share your pain. Even if your loneliness is relieved by a text message or a smiling face on your screen, those data bytes can never fully replace the full vividness of direct contact with someone who is present with you physically and emotionally.

We feel puzzled and saddened when our virtual connections leave us feeling emotionally disconnected, but it is hardly surprising that electronic interactions should be ultimately unsatisfying. Basically we are sitting alone with a screen, hoping to experience authentic closeness. We are carried so far away by the allure of these illusory connections that we end up trapped within our own private world of electronic illusion.

This age of connectivity has the danger of habituating us to an increasingly mediated, virtual form of human engagement. Real life seems to slip further and further from our grasp. I think the sadness and sense of loneliness that is so pervasive today is a sign that we have lost touch with the fullness of human contact. We come to live in a lonely world of illusions that we have created for ourselves. We can spend hours consuming one image after another, sending out one selfie after another, but actually engaging very little with others. The virtual world is absorbing and entertaining, but it is fundamentally illusory and unsatisfying. It is not real or nourishing.

Of course, we might hide behind the facades we present in direct personal encounters too, but it is much easier to construct false appearances from behind an electronic screen. When we fail to differentiate