Social Media – "Here we are, both of us lonely*"

Thanks to social media, we've become more "connected" to one another than ever before. One would think that's a good thing. Not me. There's an ever-growing mountain of research suggesting that our "social-networking, humongous connectivity" is actually driving us to become more lonely. How so?

Interactively lonely

One of the characteristics of social networking is the direct relationship between the size of our interactive network and the degree of isolation we experience. The greater the number of our connections and "friends," the more shallow we seem to become.

The greater our web of influence and connection, the more we seem to become ensconced in our own "socio-psycho-emotional zip code." In spite of the quantum growth of connecting online, people are isolating themselves emotionally and psychologically in ever increasing numbers. It's curious that when you sign up for Google$^+$, you're asked to include "…your real friends, the ones you feel comfortable sharing private details with…" Reading between the lines, what's the unspoken message here? For me, it's about the uneasiness around social media's unintended consequence of separating us from one another, actually creating greater loneliness and separation - in spite of the fact that social media's initial intention was to allow us greater "connection" with one another.

Loneliness seems to be on the increase (and understand there's a vast distinction between being "alone," and "loneliness.") An AARP study in 2010 discovered that 35 percent of adults over 45 were chronically lonely. Some physicians and healthcare providers characterize loneliness as an epidemic.

Social interaction

Two questions I would ask are: (1) Are you meeting fewer or more people (in real-time) these days? And (2) When you gather with others would you describe your bonds as less or more meaningful, less or more easy? This is really to ask, honestly and sincerely, how deeply meaningful, purposeful and sincere are your "real-world" relationships? How comfortable are you talking about personal or important matters or issues with those real-world folks with whom you say you have a "relationship?" And, is a lack of real connection driving you to relate online?

And, online, without "human" contact, so-called relationships become mere temporary linings of convenience, as easily broken off as established. Is it no wonder parents and their children, spouses and partners are seemingly becoming more and more estranged from one another?

All of which makes me curious about the rise in the numbers of psychologists, psychotherapists, counselors, social workers, marriage and family therapists and relationship coaches. Perhaps we're not "talking" to, or "connected" to our real-world "friends" as much as we think or say we are. Hmmm.

Chicken and the egg

So two questions around social media are: (1) Are social media, causing more or less (mental, emotional, spiritual and psychological) pain and suffering? And (2) Is our (mental, emotional, spiritual and psychological) pain and suffering causing us to gravitate to social media?

In other words, do those of us who feel socially "out of the loop" with friends look for connection to social media? How about those who feel "out of the loop" with one's family?

So, I would ask those who are engaged in social media to describe - honestly and sincerely - the quality of their relationship with their friends, with their families and with their spouses/partners. And what do they see or discover as a result of this inquiry? And does what they discover link up with an increased need to engage in social media?

The Casual

Research tells us there's a host of individuals - characterized as neurotic and lonely - who spend an inordinate amount of time with social media. The question is: "Why?"

Healthy, conscious relationships foster intimacy, trust, deep connectivity. When relationships are replaced by "electronic" interactions, emotional connection - the human factor that creates true relationships - goes missing; along with feelings of warmth and friendship towards the other person - what marriage researcher John Gottman says is the definitive foundational element that determines the sustainability of relationships. When there is no emotional connection, there is no friendship. True emotional connection is blocked by transmission through the ether.

We've created tools that reinforce "the casual" and augur against deeper connection - email, IM, Twitter, Facebook, etc., all the while reducing and eliminating the opportunity for true heart-felt connection. We don't spend the time it takes to have real intimacy with another person. The sad truth is the frequency of contact and the number of contacts in our network does not translate into the quality of contact.

The real thing

So, friends, relationships, and connections. The question I would ask is: How real are they? What is the nature and depth of their friendship(s)? What is the nature and the depth of their intimacy? Is the friendship and intimacy as "real" as it is in real-life? Can and does social media truly and honestly create healthy friendships? And the operative word is "healthy."

To be clear, social media is pure and simply a vehicle for connection. It doesn't create loneliness or neuroticism or addiction or anything else. We create those states for ourselves. And this bears repeating. We create these states for ourselves. Nobody, no one or no thing is doing anything TO ME. We're each responsible for our own choices and decisions, online and off.

From what I've seen, heard and read, my take is that when we're comfortable in our own skins, (even with our own discomfort!) in our day-to-day interactions with our friends, colleagues,

families, spouses/partners and others, we tend to be more real, honest, and emotionally, spiritually and psychologically mature, adult, with others online, and perhaps less needy to be online. And, the converse is also true.

Who am I?

Being comfortable one's own skin - in real life - is probably one determinant of how one "shows up" in social media situations. There are those whose "fake it till you make it" orientation to life, i.e., lacking a true sense of happiness, or security, or self-love, or centeredness or groundedness, they show up with a "false identity." This false identity reflects their sense of isolation, loneliness, lack and deficiency. Their self-esteem is determined by their updates, tweets and check-ins.

Those who have a healthier sense of self-esteem, identity and sense of their true and real self, show up just as who they are, warts and all. Perhaps less needy for online connections.

In her book, *Alone Together*, Sherry Turkle, professor of computer culture at MIT, writes: "…These days, insecure in our relationships and anxious about intimacy, we look to technology for ways to be in relationships and protect ourselves from them at the same time….The ties we form through the Internet are not, in the end, the ties that bind. But they are the ties that preoccupy…We don't want to intrude on each other, so instead we constantly intrude on each other, but not in "real time."

Within an electronic world, more people may be connecting, but fewer are relating. We may live in an increasingly inter-connected world, but we are experiencing a far less inter-related one. One major consequence of living in such a culture human contact is more likely to be limited - a poor substitute for real conversation and authentic dealings with another human being. It's questionable whether such "connecting" represents actual contact at all.

Even as it becomes easier than ever to stay "in touch" our capacity actually to touch one another physically, emotionally and spiritually is slipping away.

You can't be real and intimate from a distance

Period.

Be illusionary about relationship? Sure. But, real, authentic and intimate? No so much.

"I know it's late, I know you're weary
I know your plans don't include me
*Still here we are, both of us lonely
Both of us lonely
Why don't you stay?

Bob Seger, "We've got tonight."
© Warner/Chappell Music, Inc.

So some questions for self-reflection are:

- What face-to-face conversations do you avoid?
- Are you spending less *quality* time with your spouse/partner, children, or others close to you?
- Do you regularly send virtual birthday or holiday cards and gifts in place of the "real" thing? Why?
- In what ways do you shortchange emotional connection with others?
- Do you feel alone or lonely even when in the company of your spouse/partner, children or other loved ones? Why?
- Are you addicted to Twitter, Facebook or other social networking tools? Can you do without these tools for an hour, a few hours, a day or a week? If not, well, that's addiction, denials and protestations and "stories" notwithstanding.
- Do you engage with your iPhone or Blackberry while you're having a face-to-face conversation with another person? What does that communicate to the other person? Do you care?
- Are you on an electronic leash on weekends, days off and while on vacation

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