

Paradoxes of our Age

I

Loneliness is not the same as being alone. Alone, we can be more in touch with ourselves, the world around us, the essence of all things. Together, we can still be lonely. To be lonely is not to be without neighbours, without means of communication; it's to sense that no quantity of communication would actually get through, would successfully connect; such that one remains an island in a cruel sea.

Today we are hardly without neighbours; and are engulfed in means of communication: the word on the page, the icon on the screen, the image on the mini-screen, the spoken word on the hand-held device, the visual representation from across the world, the social media frenzy; all so much less challenging than genuine conversation. And yet—here's the first paradox: the more adept we become at harnessing these technologies, the lonelier we become. Our expectation of and capacity for quantity increases, but our experience of and trust in quality decreases. We know more; we understand less.

We meet a new person, by arrangement; they take for granted that we have checked them out on the internet, that we know the background, the history—the footprint they have left on the world. But we have learned to distrust these airbrushed accounts, these carefully altered photos, and we come into the encounter wary of the image we're being sold, reluctant to believe this person

whose identity seems so accessible—yet remote. In a world of strangers, where everyone hides their true identity, mediates their interactions, and modifies their profile, all of us are alone.

II

Boldly go where no one has gone before: this is the aspiration of our age. Boldly go into space, science, medicine; boldly go beyond athletic thresholds, known longevity, metrics of influence, popularity, fame, power; boldly enter realms of artificial intelligence, human capacity, conceivable endurance.

This is what makes the news, wins global prizes, captures the imaginations of the young and talented. Our quest is to stretch the limits of human limitation, to strain against the leash of our mortality, that one day we may finally come loose from our moorings and live life unbound, unconstrained, ready to roam into the unexplored, uncharted and unknown.

We take for granted that the more we breach the walls of human limitation, the more the challenges of our time will be conquered. There will be a cure for cancer, a drug for heart disease; there will be a technological solution for climate change, a digital way of avoiding war. We are exasperated that, here we are in the twenty-first century, yet unacceptable, anachronistic feuds, follies or foibles continue to stand in the way of rightful progress. Such things should simply step aside, so the story of the overcoming of limitations may stride on.

But what if limitation does not, in fact, name our biggest challenge? What if there is another factor, even more challenging, that constitutes our sturdiest adversary? There is indeed something deeper, more relentless, more abiding that gnaws away at our well-being: isolation. When we overcome limitation we are conquerors; when we experience isolation we have no one with whom to share the spoils. When we overcome limitation we can talk face-to-face with a new friend on the other side of the world; when we experience isolation we have no idea of the name or face of our next-door neighbour. When we overcome limitation we can live forever and fulfil our heavenly dream; when we experience isolation we are doomed to spend forever alone, and discover that ‘forever, alone’ is not heaven; but hell.

Here’s the second paradox: mechanisms for overcoming limitation invariably increase our isolation. Independence is a qualified good. There’s only one thing worse than not getting what you want—and that’s getting it. The more we become able to live without each other, the more we squander our chief and priceless gift: which is one another. We lose the art of living, which lies in the word, ‘together.’ The joy of life lies not in what we do or what we have or what we own; it lies in what we share—in what we do together.