

## HEADMISTRESS' LECTURE 2011

### 'THE ART AND NATURE OF REAL COMMUNICATION'

I would like to start with this question: at a time when we are surrounded by a plethora of technical apparatus with which to 'communicate', why is the human experience one of increasing isolation?

How can it happen that on Christmas Day 2010 a 42 year old woman living in Brighton posted a message to her 1,048 'friends' on a social networking site that she had taken an overdose, and not one of them did anything to help?

Here is a statement from a groundbreaking new book entitled, *Alone Together* by Professor Sherry Tuckle:

*Although technology means we now communicate with each other more than ever, our 'wired lives' are isolating us further and further from genuine human interaction. We expect more from technology and less from each other.*  
*(Alone Together)*

She describes how modern society has become enslaved to computers and hand-held devices, and how human beings are substituting real emotional connections for technological relationships. According to *The Independent*, February 5th 2011, her book has caused shockwaves across America. Through nearly fifteen years of research and hundreds of interviews, she portrays a world in which we are increasingly isolated from each other:

*Our devices keep us connected, offering the illusion of companionship without the demands of friendship. We may speak to each other at an unprecedented level online, but we're lonelier than ever.*

*(Alone Together)*

I would like to convey some interesting statistics:

According to research, the average teenager sends 3,500 texts a month and spends approximately seven-and-a-half hours a day on Facebook, Twitter and Instant Messenger.

In March 2010, the NSPCC published a detailed breakdown of calls made to Childline in the last five years. Although the number of calls from children and teenagers had risen by only 10%, calls about loneliness had nearly tripled in the past five years. In May 2010, the Mental Health Foundation released a report entitled *The Lonely Society?* which found that 53% of 18-34 year-olds had felt depressed because of loneliness. Nearly a third of young people said that they spent too much time communicating online and not enough in person.

They worried more about the quality of their relationships with friends and family, about being single and feeling alone than any other age group. Newspapers have described this generation as the “Eleanor Rigby” generation; better connected than any in history, yet strangely alone.

According to Mark Vernon, author of *The Meaning of Friendship*, we can become trapped in the belief that online communication is a valid substitute for genuine communication where quantity of chat masquerades for quality of conversation. Quick messages can be used to keep in close contact with family and friends or as a ‘distancing technique’ between people. In addition, the more removed the medium of communication, the easier it is to set aside our compassion and judge, ignore, condemn or finish relationships with just a few words. The reverse is also true: ‘Facebook stalking’ is an unhappy practice where young people make daily pilgrimages to the profiles of their ‘exes’, rubbing salt into their emotional wounds.

It is unnecessary to describe the huge benefits which technological communication has brought to our society by providing easy global access to information and relationships at remarkable speed. By facilitating relationships it can indeed reduce social isolation, especially for those who experience chronic loneliness, whether the root is emotional or circumstantial. There is however a large question as to whether technology is changing our core ability to relate to one another satisfactorily and exactly what the cost is of losing the meaningful contact of face-to-face encounters. In an article in *The Biologist* in February 2009, psychologist Dr Aric Sigman argues that the number of hours that people spend interacting in person has fallen dramatically since 1987, as the use of electronic media has increased. He claims that social networking sites undermine social skills and the ability to read body language.

According to the report by the Mental Health Foundation, 2010:

*Research shows that cognitive function improves if a relationship is physical, as well as intellectual, mainly because of the chemical process taking place during face-to-face encounters. Loneliness researchers say that contact with others stimulates production of the neuropeptide oxytocin, which acts as a hormone connecting with organ systems, and as a neurotransmitter that signals with the brain and throughout the autonomic nervous system. While loneliness increases the perception of stress, interferes with immune function and impairs cognitive function, oxytocin has the opposite effect. Oxytocin, which has been called the hormone of 'affiliation' has been found to prevent detrimental cardiac responses, and is believed to underpin the link between social contact and healthy hearts.*

*(The Lonely Society?)*

Vernon cites research by David Homes, a psychologist at Manchester Metropolitan University, who estimates that up to 40% of the information which people post on social networking sites could be fabricated. Vernon suggests that this is partly to protect privacy online but there is also a desire to:

*...present a side of ourselves rather than our whole selves ...we don't really live experiences, we live them to report them. We're editing ourselves rather than actually being ourselves....rather than having a genuine encounter, your friends become your audience, and you are someone else's audience. The exchange is thwarted in both directions.*

*(The Meaning of Friendship)*

This commonplace practice alienates people from themselves and from each other, thus exacerbating loneliness in a more sinister way.

The Mental Health Foundation's report of 2010 moves on to list certain additional features which have an impact on people's ability to connect with others:

*More people live alone: the percentage of households occupied by one person doubled from 6% in 1972 to 12% in 2008. The divorce rate has almost doubled in the last 50 years and the number of lone parent households continues to rise. People are living longer but many older people are doing so alone.*

*(The Lonely Society?)*

There is a crucial issue which must be raised at this point. It concerns the quality of attention we give to each other in our personal interactions. Because our technology is always on, it

pursues us for attention and we tend to pursue it. The effect of this is often intrusive: we can be having dinner with friends, in the playground with our children and our attention is stolen away by an email, text, tweet or phone call. The effect of this is that our attention is seldom given in a restful and unbroken manner to those whose company we share. As Professor Tuckle said in her report:

*Today's kids have grown up in a culture of distraction...They were raised by parents who chatted on their phones while pushing them on swings and had to compete with their parents' BlackBerrys at the end of the school day pickup. From the moment this generation met technology, it was the competition.*

*It is painful to watch children trying to show off to parents who are engrossed in their cell phones. Children are even nostalgic for the 'good old days' when parents used to read to them without the phone by their side or watch football games or movies without having the BlackBerry handy.*

*(Alone Together)*

Furthermore, some neuroscientists, such as the eminent Baroness Susan Greenfield, and Nicholas Carr, author of *The Shallows*, are suggesting that young people's brains may be being altered by internet activity. She has posed the question as to whether the rise in autism and ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder) may be due to the effects of internet use. Nicholas Carr believed that his own constant use of the internet – distractedly clicking from web page to web page, to his email account, to web video, and back again – was changing the way his brain worked and chipping away at his capacity for concentration and contemplation:

*I'd sit down with a book, or a long article, Carr said, and after a couple of pages my brain wanted to do what it does when I'm online: check email, click on links, do some Googling, hop from page to page.*

*(The Atlantic)*

This tendency for the quality of attention to be compromised by the repeated practice of 'flitting' from one image or sensation to another may go some way to explaining why the Mental Health Foundation report said, "...numerous studies have shown that internet-obsessed teenagers are less empathetic than generations past." Sadly, this diminution of empathy, of simple kindness, is becoming increasingly common, as evidenced in the new phenomenon of cyber bullying. Social networking sites such as the former 'Little Gossip', make money by feeding on the worst aspects of our human nature. The degree of harm this is doing is very worrying indeed.

At this stage, let us take a step back and consider the need for communication, its nature, and how it might best be realised.

It goes without saying that, amongst other desires, the human being is impelled by a desire for knowledge. The impulse to know arises through a deeper recognition of a lack of knowledge, or 'ignorance'. This desire to know gives rise to the need for communication: we speak and listen in order to share knowledge and information. The knowledge we seek includes both knowledge of the world and the more subtle knowledge of our self. It is this latter aspect of self-knowledge which we will dwell upon this evening: it includes the mental, emotional and spiritual dimensions of our existence.

There is a poignant truth which is that we come into the world alone and we will leave it alone. In the intervening period the seeming 'journey' of our lives is a story of self-discovery.

Those with whom we travel and form close relationships are companions along the way: together, we assist each other in this mysterious discovery of who we really are. We act as mirrors for each other: just as it is true that we cannot see our whole physical bodies except through reflection, we cannot see or know our 'inner' selves without the assistance of a reflective agent. If the physical mirror is good enough it can render us a fairly accurate image of our bodies, but never the exact likeness. Our true friends and loved ones may help us to come to know ourselves, again, through reflecting back to us something of who we really are. Ultimately, the full mystery of existence is said to be 'unknowable' as an *object* of knowledge, all inclusive and indescribable.

Although the deeply subtle nature of who we are in reality cannot be fully described by words or known by the mind, there are many helpful pointers formulated by those who have caught glimpses of it. Eckhart Tolle offers a description in his book entitled *Stillness Speaks*:

*In you, as in each human being, there is a dimension of consciousness far deeper than thought. It is the very essence of who you are. We may call it presence, awareness, the unconditioned consciousness. In the ancient teachings, it is the Christ within, or your Buddha nature. ... You are that awareness, disguised as a person. ... This is the 'I Am' that is deeper than name and form.*

*(Stillness Speaks, p.3)*

At the core of our beings, there is a deep memory of unity which causes us to seek to dissolve the pain of separation, the sense of a separate existence, which makes it appear that we are alone. This may give rise to the need for 'relationship': the move to form relationship with the 'other' seeks to eradicate separation, thereby allowing us to merge, one with the 'other'. This move to merge creates the deeper need to communicate.

As we apparently proceed through this journey of life, there is an inevitable accumulation of pain, at the emotional level. Some philosophers describe it as ‘existential misery’. Essentially, this pain is the pain of the experience of feeling separate, but as life unfolds, additional measures of pain are meted out as the naturally sensitive soul receives the impact of loss and grief which are seemingly intrinsic to the ‘journey’ and the realm of duality. Whilst we experience ourselves as separate and independent entities this appears to be inescapable.

Real communication has the power to heal some of this pain. Deep within us is the need to reach out to another in communication in order to relieve this burden. The love of the listener holds within his or her heart the unspoken question ‘What is it that you are going through? I am here for you.’ There is only the offer of his or her attention: there is no expectation, no judgement and no preconception – in essence – no ‘knowing’ whatsoever. In this space the ‘secrets’ of the heart may be spoken. The art is to listen with the heart. As the Benedictine monk Laurence Freeman puts it, communication is the “*self-revelation and self-giving of one to another which unites and transcends both ‘I’ and ‘thou.’*”

There is therefore a prerequisite to real communication: it is to be utterly and simply *present*. This means that one brings absolutely nothing to the moment of exchange: no preconceptions, desires, good intentions, noble advice, or mental content of any kind. In fact, the listener is inwardly empty and silent. What then happens is spontaneous and touched with the grace and potential of the present moment. ‘Presence’, which is non-particular, immutable and all encompassing, embraces the conversation and all that may arise within it. That which needs to be spoken is fully expressed. A meeting occurs in which the speaker and listener have merged into a greater whole: they emerge lighter, freer and closer to who they really are.

How strange it is that although we crave for real communication in which we are completely received and penetrated by each other's attention, it happens so rarely. Power of attention is the key. As Eckhart Tolle puts it:

*...true listening is a rare skill. Usually, the greater part of a person's attention is taken up by their thinking. At best, they may be evaluating your words or preparing the next thing to say. Or they may not be listening at all, lost in their own thoughts.*

*(Stillness Speaks, p.94)*

In her remarkable book *Waiting on God* Simone Weil describes this open state of attention which is intrinsic to the art of true communication:

*Attention consists of suspending our thought, leaving it detached, empty and ready to be penetrated by the object. ... Above all, our thought should be empty, waiting, not seeking anything, but ready to receive in its naked truth the object which is to penetrate it.*

*(Waiting on God, p.72)*

We should perhaps ponder the potent words, 'ready to receive in its naked truth the object which is to penetrate it.' The 'readiness' is the free state of attention, open and simple: it is an innocent condition, knowing nothing. Into this simple space the object is received just as it is, in its 'naked truth'; undistorted by any preconception or preoccupation it is allowed to enter the consciousness of the recipient. Because the recipient is totally open, he receives the person or object completely into himself, allowing it to penetrate his being absolutely. In this way, the object is fully known, just as it is. In the clarity of the recipient's consciousness whatever is needed will arise naturally. Response will be spontaneous: if speech is called for, it will be

well-measured and true. This natural, liberating and real communication rests entirely upon the power of simple attention.

If Nicholas Carr and Susan Greenfield are right in their warning that intensive internet use can indeed diminish the ability to attend, our young people find themselves in a very difficult position. The combination of an increased sense of isolation caused by a lack of face-to-face conversation and a reduction in the power to attend will serve only to exacerbate a situation in which the emotional drought they suffer is unlikely to find water.

In this regard, it is important to recognise the enormous value in providing our young people with the opportunity to be silent in meditation, contemplation or prayer. The regular practice of engaging in attentive silence enhances the power of attention and increases awareness. Increased awareness heightens human sensitivity and, with this, empathy follows. It is encouraging that many schools are now turning to meditative practices in their search to enhance the emotional well-being of our children. The adult world now has many more opportunities of this kind than previously: the need to retreat from a society which inflicts an increasing degree of noise and exerts so much pressure to keep 'doing', achieving and acquiring, is felt keenly by many people today.

At the deepest level of all, the human spirit is called to return to its source, to come home to its immutable infinity in which everything rises and falls like waves in the ocean. As Laurence Freeman so eloquently describes it, this is ultimate communication or 'communion':

*In the present moment, the 'I AM' of God, communication is spontaneous communion. The perfection of all communication therefore is silence and in true silence spirit is most purely perceived. When all forms of language have been transcended in the fullness of silence, the tap is turned completely on. Words can communicate miraculously. But they also reduce the flow of consciousness and limit communication to the mental level. So, as information*

*technology makes such advances today our need for silence increases proportionately. It is becoming increasingly evident that more words and images or merely faster transmission of information does not ensure better communication. In fact there seem to be limits to the speed and quantity of information we can absorb before the mind blocks communication altogether and insists on resting. The more we speak the more we thirst for silence ...silence heals. Silence is forgiving.*

*This does not mean that Spirit opposes the ordinary languages of communication. She is the silence within them, inherent in all truthful speech.*

*(Jesus the Teacher Within, p.182-183)*

From a slightly different perspective, ascetics and devotees retreat into silence to discover the presence of God and be guided by His word. Again the emphasis is on letting go of everything in order to receive the word of God in the stillness of the heart. This is communication at a higher level but the principle of innocent attention is the same. Mother Teresa of Calcutta perfected this practice and describes it in her book entitled *Heart of the World*:

*We cannot put ourselves directly in the presence of God if we do not practice internal and external silence.*

*In silence we find new energy and true unity. Silence gives us a new outlook on everything.*

*The essential thing is not what we say but what God says to us and through us. In that silence, He will listen to us; there He will speak to our soul, and there we will hear His voice.*

*Listen in silence because if your heart is full of other things you cannot hear the voice of God. But when you have listened to the voice of God in the stillness of your heart, then your heart is filled with God.*

*The contemplatives and ascetics of all ages and religions have sought God in the silence and solitude of the desert, forest, and mountains. Jesus himself spent forty days in the desert and the mountains, communing for long hours with the Father in the silence of the night.*

*We too are called to withdraw at certain intervals into deeper silence and aloneness with God, together as a community as well as personally. To be alone with him - not with our books, thoughts, and memories but completely stripped of everything - to dwell lovingly in his presence, silent, empty, expectant, and motionless. We cannot find God in noise or agitation.*

*In nature we find silence — the trees, flowers, and grass grow in silence. The stars, the moon, and the sun move in silence.*

*Silence of the heart is necessary so you can hear God everywhere - in the closing of a door, in the person who needs you, in the birds that sing, in the flowers, in the animals.*

*What is essential is not what we say but what God tells us and what He tells others through us. In silence He listens to us; in silence He speaks to our souls. In silence we are granted the privilege of listening to His voice.*

*(Heart of the World, p.20-21)*

In his book entitled *Where God Happens*, Rowan Williams reminds the reader that real communication is connecting with the eternal essence of a person as it manifests itself in the particular expression of time and place:

*...God made all things by an act of self-communication ...If He made all things by the Word, then each person and thing exists because God is speaking to it and in it. If we are to respond adequately, truthfully, we must*

*listen for the word God speaks to and through each element of the creation – hence the importance of listening in expectant silence. ...When we rightly respond to, relate to anyone or anything, it is as if we have found the note to sing that is in harmony with the creating Word. ...It means finding a way to speak to them that resonates with the creative word working in their depths. Love is not a feeling of goodwill toward the neighbour but the active search for that word ...so that I can speak to what is real in him. ...A certain amount of hesitation in our willingness to offer the first kind of help that comes to our minds is no bad thing if it means that we end up attending to the reality of someone else. And that word hesitation is one that the French philosopher Simone Weil put at the centre of her vision of how we should relate to each other in love: we "hesitate" as we might do on the threshold of some new territory, some unexplored interior. It is an aspect of our reverence for each other."*

*(Where God Happens, p.82-84)*

The essence that Rowan Williams talks about is creative and indicates what is needful for that person in the present. If we can embrace the expansive dimension that is being described here, I think we will find that it opens our vision to the mysteries of what lies behind the surface as the course of a person's life unfolds.

At the start of this lecture we considered the ways in which technological communication fails to meet the real needs of humanity. In my personal and professional experience I have always found that on those occasions where there has been a 'real' conversation, where there has been listening with the heart, that which arises serves unfailingly to shine light for the way ahead and the person emerges encouraged, refreshed and uplifted.

It is reverence for the beauty of the human spirit as it finds its way through the journey of life that causes us to cherish the central part which true communication plays as we accompany each other home.

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