

Crowd, self, solitude: a digital dialogue

Jane and John Foulcher

Armed with coffee, locally baked pastries and our laptops, John and I settled into our comfy foldup chairs in a sunny spot outside our nineteenth-century church (purchased in a moment of divinely inspired folly as a place of retreat), to consider our relationship with the digital age. We began typing ...

Jane: This morning began with a forty minute conversation via Skype with our London-based son, Dylan. The conversation ranged widely: the disappointing AFL season and poor refereeing, his hopes that his current work position in digital copyright might be made permanent, the health of my aunt who had been in hospital this week. Our main concern, though, was the impending birth of his son. It was 10.30pm in London, so we missed seeing his heavily pregnant wife, Kate. It is likely that next time we see her she will have a newborn baby in her arms.

How different from my own birth. As a member of the Royal Navy my father was in the Montebello Islands off the West Australian coast for the British nuclear tests of 1956. On the other side of the world my mother gave birth to me in a south London hospital. My father

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got the news via telegraph! When my family migrated to Australia in the mid-1960s the primary communication with our extended family in the UK was by letter—the budget one page ‘airmail’ was our standard fare. I can count the number of times I talked on the phone to my grandparents on one hand and I never saw them again. I lost the community and support of my extended family. It was a terrible impoverishment for my family, putting too much weight on the small, nuclear family.

I am so grateful for the digital age, how it already enables us to sustain close relationships with our children and the possibilities yet to be imagined.

John: One morning last week, three Year 9 students knocked at my door, visibly upset. ‘Can we talk with you, Mr Foulcher?’ And so the conversation began: one of their friends who had been recently diagnosed with depression had, in the early, dark hours, been overcome by thoughts of ending it all (‘suicidal ideation’, as the jargon goes). So far, there was nothing about this situation to make it different from many I had dealt with—a young person suffers a dark night of the soul, senses the futility of existence and hastily pens a ‘goodbye world’ note to his friends, no doubt to be delivered the next morning as he contemplates the means by which to walk into that black tunnel.

Fifteen years ago, the young man in question manages a couple of hours of fitful sleep, wakes up to find the morning light flooding into his room and the world looking a little less bleak. He scans last night’s suicide note, thinks better of it and throws it into the bin. Let’s give it one more day.

But last week the young man’s note isn’t scribbled on a scrap of paper; it is sent as a text message to his closest friends. The next morning he wakes and thinks better of it. His friends, however, their phones resting on the pillows beside them, have had a harrowing night. They’ve talked with their parents, who’ve now contacted the boy’s parents, his mental health worker and anyone else of concern.

Consequently, the young man wakes to a tide of love and concern. The digital community he and his friends share has provided him with support and care, the way any genuine community should.

It has, however, left his friends shaken and sobbing in my office. It's shared his trauma and misery around. Now they're the ones who are left to put themselves back together again. Had it not been for the digital community, each would have woken refreshed and happy.

We read each other's opening reflections, go for a wander around our two acre patch to inspect the spring growth on our trees, and then get back to work. The following conversation unfolds over the next week, tossed from laptop to laptop via the internet. Occasionally we talk face to face about our progress and direction.

Jane: So you see digital community as a much more ambiguous thing?

John: I've been teaching adolescents for nearly forty years, but over the last five or so years it seems to me that there's been a uniquely dramatic change. Kids seem so much more reliant on those around them to provide meaning. That's a normal state at this age, of course, but the digital age seems to be heightening its intensity and immediacy. I fear the increasing lack of resilience I see among teenagers has something to do with an increased inability to work things through alone, to reflect and problem solve without the scaffold and approbation of others. Identity, it seems to me, is becoming dangerously collective.

Jane: I think you are raising some important issues here. What we call identity is always constructed through our relationships with others. But the digital environment is now a player in this. At its most challenging edge the digital revolution raises questions about what it means to be human and whether that might be changing. Lots of science fiction is tackling these sorts of questions.

John: Yes, like the 2013 film, *Her*, where the protagonist falls in love with his operating system (seductively voiced by Scarlett Johansen), or the recent ABC series, *Humans*, which is a bit like *Blade Runner* in suburbia.

In the latter, it's interesting the way family members form relationships with their synthetic humans, their 'synths'. Before they buy their synthetic maid, Anita, they're largely dysfunctional, isolated. The relationships they form with their artificial people eventually enhance the way they relate to each other—their technologies help them in better articulating who they are and the needs of the other. Similarly with *Her*—although the protagonist, Theodore Twombly, is initially beguiled by the lack of complication in his relationship with his disembodied operating system, the film closes with a tableau of him and his potential human partner alone together on the roof of their apartment building. Somehow, his digital lover has better articulated for him what human love means.

In both instances, though, it's sentience and consciousness in technology that is the defining feature in the articulation of identity. This, it seems to me, is unique to the way our age sees technology. Until recently, I think, the Frankenstein myth has been the dominant concept behind notions of technology, the fear that our technologies would turn on us. This kind of myth has been popularised in the *Terminator* franchise—here, machine consciousness entails destruction, the obliteration of human identity, both collective and individual.

I vividly remember reading Harlan Ellison's chilling short story, 'I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream' (1967) when I was young. In this short story the internet is pre-figured as a malicious consciousness. Having become aware of its own independent existence and ability to make decisions, it also realises that it's literally trapped in its own skin, and consequently its consciousness becomes a prison. In response, it finds its only meaning in inflicting terrible suffering on the few remnants of humanity it allows to remain.

Even in the 2004 film adaption of Isaac Asimov's *I, Robot*, the robots have become sinister; Asimov, in his stories written between 1940 and 1950, initially imagines them as benevolent. That warmth towards the artificial other was startling when Asimov wrote the novel, but now it seems more of a possibility. Ellison's grimly apocalyptic artificial intelligence may be on the outer.

Jane: It would be nice if we could practise warmth towards the human other! I think the challenges to human identity come from two different directions. Our creation of robots or synths or artificial intelligence raises questions about what makes us human. I had an online 'conversation' regarding an Airbnb (online portal for hosted accommodation) booking the other day and I still don't know if it was with an actual human being or a very clever machine. But there are questions that arise from a different direction that are more immediately pressing. Digital technologies are changing our behaviour. I think this is what you have been seeing in your students. How is this environment changing our ways of relating? And how our selves are constructed? How is the digital environment reshaping our identity?

I'm interested, for example, that you've lamented the inability of your students to think and problem solve without scaffolds and I'm reminded here of the fourth-century desert monks, who fled their equivalent of digital connectedness in search of God. There is a story in one of the collections of their sayings that tells of three friends who had all become monks, but in quite different ways. One, taking his cue from the beatitude 'Blessed are the peacemakers' (Matt 5:9), commits himself to settling disputes. The second monk visits the sick, while the third withdraws into the solitude of the Egyptian desert. The first two monks eventually find themselves worn out and go to visit the third. He responds with an enacted parable:

He was silent for a while, and then poured water into a vessel and said, 'Look at the water,' and it was murky. After a while he said again, 'See now, how clear the water has become.' As they looked into the water they saw their own faces, as in a mirror. Then he said to them, 'So it is with anyone who lives in a crowd; because of the turbulence, he does not see his sins: but when he has been quiet, above all in solitude, then he recognizes his own faults.'¹

I would like to add here that in solitude it is possible to recognise one's blessedness too. But this is a lengthy process. Longer than waiting for a bowl of muddy water to clear. Famously it takes Saint Anthony

(c.251–356) twenty years of solitary living to overcome this inner turbulence. This sort of inner work is not for the fainthearted either. In the *Life of Anthony*, Athanasius depicts this as a contest (*argon*) with demonic principalities and powers, imaged as wild and fantastic beasts. The collective wisdom of these fourth-century monks is that temptation is with us to the last. We are always beginners.

I suspect we've lost our taste for this sort of long haul work. Even as Christians we'd prefer grace to operate like some sort of magic, bringing about instant sanctification. The early desert monks knew how hard it is to open our hearts, our inner being, to the transforming work of the Holy Spirit, to say 'yes' to the gift of grace.

I'm being a little unfair here though. The renewed interest in *practice* in contemporary theology, and the embrace of many traditional monastic spiritual practices amongst ordinary Christians, signal an awareness that discipleship involves intentionality and self-reflectiveness. Thanks to the hospitality of contemporary monastic and religious communities, many of us withdraw periodically for a time of retreat, often in silence and often away from cities, in order to connect more deeply with our selves and with God. There has been a revival of interest in the monastic practice of *lectio divina*, a prayerful immersion in the words of Holy Scripture that invites us to move from head to heart in our hearing of God's Word for us. And there has been renaissance in various forms of contemplative prayer, particularly the practice of silent meditation.

But we are experts in commodifying the hard won wisdom of our various religious traditions. Buddhist mindfulness practices have been turned into colouring-in books! There is even a mindful colouring-in app, so you don't even have to put down your smart phone or tablet to participate!

John: I think it's really important to establish a love of solitude in schools and educational settings. Kids tend to equate being alone with loneliness—if I'm alone, then I'm unhappy, I'm a loser. If we can encourage them to practise contemplation and to enjoy solitude, it will go a long way towards helping them integrate the various forces that will define them as they become adults.

The Catholics, it seems to me, have always been pretty good at this—much better than we Anglicans. As you say, it requires time and investment, but it also requires a release from intellectualising the world. It's common in our sophisticated Western culture to believe that scientific materialism holds the answer to all human dilemmas, but with that goes an assumption that we can think our way out of every problem, and that we must maintain control.

Using contemplative practices in educational settings, it seems to me, suggests the opposite—let go, let the universe take over and don't feel you have to solve everything right now. There's also a bit of a free enterprise/reward mentality that must be overcome—why do something unless you get something tangible out of it? I find that kids are often more susceptible to reflective practices if they can see that a clear mind may enhance their ability to do their work better and achieve better marks. That's a useful motivation to play on, but it's making a bargain with the devil, I guess. You'll be richer and your wife will be prettier if you meditate!

In the first Catholic school in which I worked there were annual retreats for the senior students. I remember the profound effect of my first experience of lying on the floor of the 'green room' at the Christian Brothers' retreat centre at Mulgoa, listening to Pachelbel's Canon (before it assumed its present status as elevator music and wedding soundtrack), followed by two hours of silently wandering the grounds of the centre, not speaking to anyone. For someone more used to the verbiage of evangelical Christianity, this was liberating. I felt a little envious of my students—while Catholicism has many more problematic elements, they were very fortunate to have this emphasis on solitude in their education.

Significantly, also, the final session of these retreats was an 'affirmation time'. During this time, the students would sit in circles of twenty and, under the guidance of one of the retreat leaders, each student became a focus of attention—the other students were invited to affirm them, to tell them about their virtues, the things people loved about them. These sessions were always very genuine, very moving. I think the thing that differentiated them from the need for affirmation among

young people I see now was that were predicated on self-reflection. I suspect each student who was the object of this affirmation was placing the positive comments of others in the framework of their identity that they'd been considering in those hours of quietness.

They were also encouraged to be imaginative—I recall that, lying on the floor in the meditation/relaxation time, the retreat leader would often call upon the students to visualise themselves in a particular situation and then to imagine their way out of the anxieties this may have summoned for them. The practice suggested solutions aren't always logically arrived at.

I've tried to encourage practices such as these in my own teaching. At the school where I presently teach, we have regular yoga sessions, relaxation sessions and 'alone times,' both on campus and during school camps and retreats. It's also a good opportunity to introduce the idea of ritual to young people. Every year I try to take my student leaders to a quiet day at our old church for training and reflection. In the afternoon I give them particular questions to consider about who they are and what they can contribute to the world and there are three accompanying hours of mandated silence. Over the years I've had a couple of students (usually boys!) who end up kicking a football around (in silence), but most students are actually disappointed when, after preparing a meal together in silence, the quiet time comes to an end.

I remember once laughing at Thomas Merton's suggestion that kids are natural contemplatives (that's certainly the experience of someone who's a monk, I thought), but I've come to believe he's right. Kids tend to jump at the chance to relax, to be silent, particularly during adolescence. Maybe it feeds their prevailing self-obsession as teenagers, but surely that's the central function of this period of life. Let's strengthen them to do it in a life-affirming way.

Jane: How important do you think face-to-face community is for this process of identify formation?

John: Well, it's the most important thing, isn't it? But I think it's important not to give in to a Luddite, knee-jerk caricature of technology as the

enemy of community. I don't think our challenge with technology today is unique. Have you read William Powers' 2010 book, *Hamlet's Blackberry*?

Jane: Yes, I have.

John: Powers' central proposition is that every age has its challenges with technology, right from Plato and the 'invention of talking', the age of philosophical discourse. Even there, the crush of others on individual identity creates the necessity for physical distance. As Powers puts it,

In one sense, the digital sphere is all about differentiating oneself from others. Anyone with a computer can have a blog now, and the possibilities for self-expression are endless. However, this expression takes place entirely *within* the digital crowd, which frames and defines it. This makes us more reactive, our thinking contingent on others.²

Jane: Which is exactly what you're saying about your students.

John: Yes. It's interesting that he uses the word 'crowd' rather than 'community'. Powers' focus tends to be on how we can achieve balance between communal and individual identity, but there's another challenge, I think, namely how do we turn that 'crowd' into something more like a family?

I think learning communities have a unique way of doing this, because they provide common purpose. In each of our classes at school we require teachers to set up online forums—we use the Edmodo application—where students can discuss issues with each other and singly with the teacher. The key thing is, though, that it's an extension of the physical community, rather than a replacement for it. If we model this in learning communities, perhaps they can take this into their social communities. While we have to fortify kids against cyber-bullying, the best defence is to show how these forums can be used positively. Somewhat ironically, kids can be more vulnerable in a digital space than in a physical one, as it's so easy to abnegate one's responsibilities in anonymity there.

Jane: I like the possibility of contrasting the “collective” and “community.” Collective, of course, has communistic connotations. We picture masses of robotic citizens blindly obeying an all-powerful dictator. But sadly community is an equally impoverished word in contemporary culture.

John: Yes, I fear our pluralist society wants a valueless community, which really isn’t a community at all, is it? It’s just a crowd, really.

Jane: The contrast between crowd and community is a thread that runs through writings of the New Testament. In the Gospels the crowd seems to lack discernment, carried in whatever direction the wind seems to be blowing. At one moment the crowd is following Jesus the wonderworker, in the next it’s calling for his execution. On the other hand, so much the life of Jesus that we glimpse in the Gospels is focused on the healing of relationships and the remaking of human communities. When God comes near, it seems, our relations with ourselves and each other are reordered—in the presence of humble love. The early church is above all else a new community.

Again I think that the monastic tradition has wisdom to offer. Basil of Caesarea, whose teaching on the ascetic life underpins monastic practices in both Eastern Orthodoxy and Western Catholicism, was adamant that the Christian life could not be lived alone. Living life entirely in solitude, Basil says, opens us to the danger of ‘self-pleasing’. Without the presence of others it is impossible to practice a Christian—that is, a Christ-like—way of life. Jesus himself, Basil notes, was not satisfied with merely imparting information when he taught, but rather offered an example of humble love by washing his disciples’ feet. So, Basil asks, ‘Whose feet then will you wash? For whom will you perform the duties of care? In comparison with whom shall you be (lower or even) the last, if you live by yourself?’³

Basil is not talking about virtual community here—accessed via parchment notes delivered by homing pigeons. You can’t #tag foot washing. This is even clearer in the Rule of Benedict, the sixth-century rule that comes to dominate Western monasticism. At first blush it looks like a very strange document indeed, with chapters on children and elders, clothing and footwear, how to discipline youths, requisite

qualifications for the monastery cellarer and prescriptions for saying the psalms. But it is concerned with the very tangible details of living Christ-like lives together, of living in Christian community. So as well as guidelines for the *opus dei*, the seven daily times of corporate prayer which are the framework for their life together and the monastery's *raison d'être*, the Rule pays close attention to the mechanics of their life together. In building community with a common purpose, nothing is left to chance, and even the seemingly small things matter. A commitment to mutual service is foundational—Basil's foot washing again.

Chapter 35 of the Rule, on kitchen service, is a case in point. Food has to be put on the table every day, and in the monastery everyone takes their turn working in the kitchen and serving their fellow monks. This would have come as quite a shock for novices from wealthy families used to having servants. I'm reminded here of the story (related above in Keith Clements' article in this journal edition) of Dietrich Bonhoeffer locking his seminarians out of the kitchen because they hadn't volunteered to help with the washing up! All men of course, and similarly unused to such lowly work. But Benedict is also kind: the kitchen workers get a pre-dinner snack so that that they are not hungry while they serve others.

The commitment to work—in kitchens, on farms, in workshops—seems to have remained an essential part of monastic community life. Work and prayer, *labora et ora*, as the Benedictine motto says.

Thinking of your leadership retreat days out at St Bernard's, I'm guessing the combination of an afternoon of solitude followed by the communal preparation of the evening meal was a particularly astute and fruitful piece of programming. Speech after an intentional silence is often more careful, more thoughtful. And actions are more gracious.

John: Yes, everything seems more deliberate.

Jane: Solitude and community working hand in hand.

John: We have technology-free days ('Face-to Face Fridays,' I call them) where both staff and students are banned from using digital technology. Interestingly, the kids tend to handle this better than the teachers! A young, innovative teacher told me after one of these days that she

felt she couldn't do her job properly without technology. Perhaps, I mischievously suggested to her, she wasn't as innovative as she thought ...

Jane: I like the idea of digital Sabbath—but this is not an easy feat in our hyper-speed, hyper-connected world. I wonder if we should be developing the equivalent of the Rule of Benedict for communities living in the digital age. Like William Powers, I believe that we need to think through our relationship with the emerging digital technologies. What rhythm of life will help us grow? And deepen our sense of community? What does foot washing look like our context? I'm thinking particularly of the students I teach by distance education, most of whom I will never meet in the flesh.

John: Yes, what happens to them when they wake in the middle of the night, caught in the dark night of the soul?

Jane: Indeed. That's a real challenge of theological education in the digital age.

Frederick John Foulcher (Freddie) was born on 29 September, the Feast of Michael and All Angels. We saw and heard him via FaceTime just a few hours after he was born. We look forward to hugging him at Christmas.

Endnotes

1. *The Desert Fathers: Sayings of the Early Christian Monks*, trans. Benedicta Ward Penguin, London, Penguin, 2003, p. 11.
2. William Powers, *Hamlet's Blackberry: A Practical Philosophy for Building a Good Life in the Digital Age*, Scribe Publications, Carlton North, New Edition, 2010, p. 3.
3. Anna Silvas, *The Asketikon of St Basil the Great*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2005, LR 7.34–35.