

FRAGMENTATION OF THE MODERN MIND

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For some years I've had a disquieting feeling, then a conviction, about what it means for us to be swamped in media. A feeling that the mass of emails, net flicks, TV, cell phone texting, and Facebooking (all of which I do enjoy) – is keeping us from each other, isolating us in a world of electronic loneliness, driving us into a wired tangle with desperate and potentially devastating results. We seem to be losing ground, lessening our connection with each other – and that is what makes us human. I do see a turnaround, but let's start at the beginning.

I recognize TV and movies are fun. I have friends with 12,000 songs on their iPods, and I know they really enjoy listening to them – I see them enjoying it. I have studied consumer high tech all my adult life, done hundreds of focus groups and online studies on videogames, web sites and mobile phones. Really I'm in it up to my neck – which hopefully qualifies me for this adventure. (Though maybe it also begs the question, how can I now say these things are bad?)

Actually I'm not saying they're all bad, just that four hours of TV a day for the average American (per the US Census), is too much. Without email I couldn't run my business, without the internet I couldn't field the online surveys that comprise so much of my work. But I fear we're living with ever weakening social bonds. Connecting directly with each other has been central to our survival as a species, not to mention our well being and happiness. And I don't mean connecting through a screen.

Almost continual media consumption, living alone, ever less real face to face human contact, is, I fear, leaving us shattered and shaking, far from the grounded, loving selves we seek to be – and, as I see it, far from what God means us to be. Somehow we are becoming more anxious, talking faster and feeling less, more neurotic, warping the way we communicate and relate. All of which starves our souls and literally starves our physical health. Why in America, supposedly the richest country in the world, are our children facing an epidemic of obesity, diabetes, and likely to live shorter lives than their parents?

In case you think I'm overstating all this, consider the omniscient words of the poet T.S. Eliot from 1963, about television: that it “permits millions of people to listen to the same joke at the same time, and yet remain lonesome.”

The bottom line, according to the US Census of 2006, the thing that American do more than any other, more than work, is to consume media (though I don't think they're counting sleep). It clearly is the dominant thing in our lives, and in our culture. It's almost more real than what we do the rest of the time. The census predicts that people will devote half their lives to TV, the Internet, radio (or music), and reading (though I don't mind the reading so much; I like to read, maybe that's why I excuse it).

Further, as the brain scientists say, the neurons which “fire together wire together.” The actual neural pathways in the brain have to be used or they fall away. The pathways between different parts of our brain, that fire when we are socially connected in a loving and healthy way – those can wither, can fail to grow in the first place among kids and youth who are not socially connected. Sadly, we can lose the ability to humanly connect.

One in four adult Americans live alone. I find that hard to believe, perhaps because I live in a small bedroom community on the California coast with many families. I suppose the aloneness is more prevalent in the cities. But the source of the data, again, is the US Census – you really can't argue with it.

Not to belabor you with facts, but in 2000 Americans spent 3,333 hours taking in media, most of that watching TV (1,407 hours) as reported by Janet Kornblum in USA Today. That's 146 days, almost five total months.

In case you're consoled by thinking the Internet is better (it's interactive, has more real information than TV soap operas) –well, we're using the Internet and at the same time watching more TV than ever. A Nielsen report from July, 2008 says TV viewership continues to rise (now 127 hours/month), while we're also giving 9% more hours to the Internet vs. the year before.

I basically think there's no limit to the amount of media we can consume. Sci-fi movies used to present totally bizarre scenarios where humans don't have human life, they just "plug in" to experience life. Not really so far fetched, is it?

When rental movie videos first came out, the film industry was in a tizzy. People wouldn't go to the movies! The result: we rented movies and went to the movies – total consumption just rose.

The other day a marketer for video on mobile phones was telling me about pass over, and he didn't mean the religious holiday. When a mom has a small child in, say, a grocery cart – and the mom is trying to get through the vegetable isle – she'll "pass over" the cell phone so the child will watch a video and be distracted.

I don't mean to criticize. If I was a single mom, just off from my shift, I'd sure use the TV to occupy the kids so I could have time to make dinner. I'm just trying to describe our predicament (or tragedy if it continues to its' logical conclusion), and I'd like to describe possible ways out. Which I do see.

I was thinking about this and talking with my friend Richard, sitting on the steps of my church, enjoying the sun, when it occurred to me that all this may be contributing to the epidemic of ADD our kids are facing. Think about watching the latest quick cut video, or the latest car crash and special effects smorgasbords from almost any movie – wouldn't that leave you kind of jangled?

I used to love watching Steven Seagal movies. Unrestrained, powerful, fully morally justified violence (well, pretty justified... he was always wailing on the bad guys). Sometime in my late 40's I started to realize those movies left me uneasy, kind of anxious – I had the feeling they weren't good for me. So now, as I approach 60, I almost never watch them.

Another of the major impulses for this work was my recognition that I, and many people, are speaking so much faster – and hugely interrupting each other. I was turning into a Fox News talking head, and kind of a rude one. These shows – where people talk over each other, or all yell at each other at the same time – that can't be good. But it just reflects, I fear, what the rest of us are doing.

I suspect we talk faster because we want to be heard – we have the feeling (probably right) that the other person isn't really listening. After all, are we really listening to them? The other day when a friend needed to get off the phone, I rudely blurted out, "Later!" and slammed down the receiver (before him – ha!). I wanted it to be clear, or at least give the indication, that I was the one cutting things off. A couple days later, a business friend did exactly the same thing to me. We want to feel noticed, and cared for – short of that, we want to feel in control. It's almost like a contest for who can be the most abrasive.

More seriously, teachers tell me that in the last dozen years the attention span of grade school students has fallen in half. Let's hear that again. Fallen in half. It used to be a teacher could run with a subject for 24 minutes, and keep the kids' attention. Now if you don't introduce a new topic every 12 minutes, you lose 'em. While multitasking is impressive, doesn't it make it a lot more difficult to concentrate and complete a task? In another ten years, does that mean kids will only be able to concentrate on a topic for six minutes? What about when it's three minutes, and all of life is changing and rushing so much faster. Then we are hurtling toward...?

I read that a Sunday New York Times gives you more new information than a typical person in the 18th century got in their entire life. So things really are speeding up. I think we can all feel that. We've gone from a stroll through the village square to the fire hose gush of information on the Internet. Even the old inner city neighborhood, with it's life on the front stoop, was better than cozing up to a computer screen. This is scary.

How much faster can we go, till we break into atoms. Is that what God has in mind, that we all return to molecules and He starts all over? Will we multi-task and blab at breakneck speed till we morph onto a higher plane – somehow I don't think so. The doctor prescribes more time sitting under a tree, preferably with a friend.

I don't mean just to down modern media. I am not a Luddite, trying to smash the 19th century factory looms in England so I can (hopefully) go back to weaving in my cottage by the sea. It's not going to happen, modern communication is here to stay. We have to find a way to work with it, humanize it, still be in loving touch with each other.

Taking your cell phone on vacation (or your "Crackberry," as the Blackberry is affectionately known) – is a mistake – if you're answering business calls every hour. Vacations in Hawaii are meant for time with friends and family, time to recharge you, not your cell phone. (I'm speaking from experience here. As a consultant I find it hard – maybe impossible – to say no to a good client – even when I'm on vacation.) I just heard from a friend, what I find almost beyond belief, that some people use the Crackberry as an alarm clock, and leave it by their bedside. If they hear the beep of an incoming message while asleep, they get up to check it. That's just nuts.

Making ourselves available 24/7 can only lead to burnout, in my view. And on the way, incredible inefficiency. I recall that Lee Iacocca, when he was turning around Ford, would take off every weekend. On Sunday evenings he would go in his home office to plan his goals for the work week. Stepping back is part of working smarter. And consider if getting that next promotion is worth giving up so much time with your family.

A Sprint study from 2006 showed that 93% of respondents took their cell phone on vacation with them. Seems kind of quaint to ask the question, now. We all just do it, as a matter of course. I'll hardly go for a walk in the country without my cell phone (if I'm attacked by a bear, I need to phone for help, of course). What's next, a surgical phone implant (the mobile ear pieces kind of look like that, a Star Trek or Vulcan extension for our brain)?

I remember a friend at Microsoft telling me he was out for a few days, and when he came back he had 400 emails. I had a young friend in a dot.com start up (very nice young man), and he and his five friends were in one room, desks together in a small square, all looking at each other. But they'd hardly ever talk, it was all via email. After all, as he said, then there's a paper trail. Sounds kind of Orwellian. Some business cultures definitely are more imbued with techno-communication than others, and I suppose it's more prevalent on the tech coasts – but it's spreading.

From my industry, videogames, a survey was done some years ago by a game magazine, where they asked who was the most attractive woman in the world – and the winner was not a real woman. It was the Tomb Raider gal (played by Angelina Jolie in the Tomb Raider movie, but they were talking about the character in the game). The woman they liked best was a pixelized fake.

What about a video screen on your toothbrush (don't laugh). I already have a video screen on the pump at the gas station, and yes, I watch it – can't help myself. Why live at all, just lay back and let the high def wash over you?

Ace-Comm, based on a study of 1000 US and 1000 UK/German teens in 2005/2006, found they spent more time on their cell phones than on homework. Well, teens have always liked to talk, but I'd like to see them do it more in person.

Recently a marketing exec said cell phones will be the dominant personal electronic device, because they're 24/7. And that's the case. Kids are losing sleep because they're texting at 3 am, presumably under the covers, lit by the dim glow of their cell screen.) It's said about ¼ of teens “talk to people they know their parents would disapprove of.” Scary. The television show where they catch countless Internet predators, and catch them so easily, isn't making me feel any better. A study of school children in Australia showed that “42% of boys and 40% of girls were tired enough that their concentration was impaired at school because of late night texting.”

It's been predicted by the Gartner (research) Group that “by 2010, 70% of the population in developed countries will spend 10 times longer per day interacting with people in the online world than in the physical one...” As we forget what a real woman and a real friend feels like, don't we step into a shadowy replica of life?

It's no surprise media is so seductive. Anthropologists say that we're physiologically wired that if we see and hear something, it's real. So, sadly for us, we think media is real.

And it's not just that we're not spending enough quality time with people we're close to. We're not spending enough time with ourselves. Without listening to our own hearts, we lose our inner compass.

We all know people in business, maybe a lot of people, who really don't want to talk to anyone anymore – everything needs to be filtered through email (gosh, you might have an emotional exchange – what would we do??) I know this is more prevalent on the coasts in tech industries, but again I think it's creeping across the landscape. People say they only do email because it's more efficient, and very often it is, but I suspect it's more comfortable. You're always comfortable, in the electronic dead zone.

Electronic coldness doesn't get much worse than dumping a boyfriend or girlfriend via texting – and then of course immediately blocking them from your cell phone and de-friending them on Facebook.

It must have been appalling for a 21-year old worker at a retail store in Wales to get a text message, “We will not require your services anymore... Thank you for your time with us.”

A youth pastor I know told me he's seen kids with hundreds of “friends” on Facebook, who yet were dreadfully lonely. In some part of us I have to believe we all crave close connections, but as the song says, we're “looking for love in all the wrong places.”

Well, how about some slightly better news...

THE VALUE OF ELECTRONIC CONNECTIONS

Is there a value in Facebook and all the rest? Certainly, as I've used Facebook the last few months it's kept me more in touch with people I already know, and that's worthwhile. (If it's your main conduit to the world, and you try to build deep personal relationships starting from there, I suspect you're on a dead end.) But, the work friend who notes that he's off to his daughter's gymnastic competition, and will be out of the office, thereby tells me that he has a daughter, he really cares about her, and he's a good Dad – at least that's what I took out of it. I knew him pretty well already, so I was building on that, not just taking a story from a stranger.

The news feeds that instantly update your friends on Facebook at first got a real negative reaction, as Clive Thompson describes it in a 2008 *New York Times* article, as: “a long list of up-to-the-minute gossip about their friends, around the clock, all in one place.” In the first few days 284,000 people had joined a group (well, electronically joined), to complain about it. But soon people came to like it – and like it a lot.

Thompson went on to talk about people getting a solid value from the flow of all this minutia about their friends (more a benefit for people you already know, I would say) – you stay in touch with them, in a helpful way.

As a friend described it to me, when you physically see someone only a few times a year, all the Facebook notes help you keep up. You know where they went for vacation, that they watched deer in the backyard with their kids, and, yes, when they bought new socks (all real examples for me) – but it does add up. As Thompson writes, you “sense the rhythms” of their lives in a new way. “...over time, the little snippets coalesce into a surprisingly sophisticated portrait of your friends' and family members' lives, like thousands of dots making a pointillist painting.”

When I was a boy in the 1950's, my Dad, who always had an active mind, told me that studies had shown – whether you live in a small town or a big city – that we have about 150 people we "know" by sight, people who make up our own "group." Which is just the number in a monkey tribe. Thompson talks about Robin Dunbar, who popularized this concept in 1998 – so much so, this 150 is now known as the "Dunbar number." Thompson's thought is that we're reducing our "real" group by devoting so much time and energy to our "electronic" tribe. A balance we need to keep in mind.

"Psychologists," Thompson says, "have long known that people engage in 'parasocial' relationships with fictional characters, like those on TV shows or in books, or with remote celebrities we read about in magazines. Parasocial relationships can use up some of the emotional space in our Dunbar number..." *For me, the very fact that there's a word like 'parasocial' is totally creepy.*

Maybe we are pursuing electronic connections because the old ones have slipped so far beyond our grasp – the old forms of clubs, bowling teams, church suppers, and sitting on our front porch have long faded. There's no denying that, as Robert Putnam so stunningly and depressingly shows in his book *Bowling Alone* – which I will discuss at length, in a bit. Maybe it's just too hard to make personal, face to face relationships. Are we giving up, just laying back and popping in the iPod ear buds – while your spouse does the same beside you in bed, as my wife accused me of doing the other evening. Are we irreversibly headed down the slippery slope? Will more depression, more people living alone, angry flaming emails and blogs be our only portion?

I don't think so. Despite the grimness of where we are, and what we've lost, I sense we're on the path, working it out. (*Remember, as my mother said, I am an incredible optimist.*)

I wonder if Facebook may be humanity slouching toward Bethlehem, trying to find a solution (OK, maybe it's just stumbling at this point). Facebook and the myriad other social sites are meant to be personal, and compared to plain email I'd say they're almost cozy – with pictures of friends and family, and little personal notes about whatever's going on. It's kinda like sitting over a cup of tea for a friendly chat – sort of.

Before we were connected to a village, then a neighborhood. Now we can be connected to the whole world. Down as we are, maybe we can find our way through to something better. Maybe far better.

Meantime, more discouraging news.

MENTAL ACUITY

Besides leaving our souls sluggish in the backwash, does this wave of media also swamp our minds, how we think and learn? It seems so. To me, as a person who could never even listen to music when I studied or worked, it seems obvious. Though the younger generation(s) might strongly disagree, as multi-tasking is so part of them. They're doing homework on the PC, listening to music or the TV (maybe both), IM-ing – all at once, and happily so, it would appear. But I would suggest all is not well in the state of Denmark.

A 2006 study from the National Academy of Sciences says “What’s new is that even if you can learn while distracted, it changes how you learn to make it less efficient and useful,” according to Russell A. Poldrack, a psychology professor at UCLA.

The doctor says that your brain essentially learns in two ways: declaratively, and secondly by habit. And, you use different parts of your brain for each. If you memorize a phone number, that information is always there for you (kinda reminds me how I would memorize lists in school, by saying them aloud).

Alternately, with “habit” learning, if you just “punch it in (a phone number) 1000 times, then even if you don’t remember it consciously, you can go to the phone and punch it in.”

The point is, if you’re distracted (i.e., multi-tasking), your brain is more likely to be using the “habit” way of learning, and using the part of the brain corresponding to that. Still, as a caveat, Poldrack says that music alone, as it makes people happier (more relaxed?), can be a positive in learning.

The sample for the above study was small, 14 people, but with the average person in America soaking in six hours of media a day, there’s a lot of salty distraction going on.

Another 2008 study, from the Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, shows that too many choices reduces our ability to focus.

People were given a varying number of choices, in the lab, classroom and in shopping malls – then their ability to focus was tested. For those who’d faced lots of choices previously, they were much worse when given tasks like math problems. Even when shopping, like shopping using a gift registry, the effect was the same.

It seems obvious – too many choices, too many distractions floating around, and you start to get a little dizzy – like spinning around on the grass when you were a kid. Stop and think, how many choices do we have? Well, there’s hundreds of cable shows, an almost infinite number of web sites, continual email and Facebook entries; pick any song you want – when you want it, on your iPod. 100,000 or so NetFlix movies just a day away. “Genius” software that tracks the music or movies or books you like and suggests others you might like (and it’s starting to do it pretty well, though not as good as my best friend).

And I enjoy all of this above – just not so much!!

I will add a caveat here – at least for teenagers I’m not so sure the multi-tasking is really getting in their way – most of them do seem to be learning pretty well.

Back to the big picture, the importance of always being connected (like the 24/7 news cycle), is shown in a young woman’s comment in a *New York Times* article: “It’s like, if you don’t check your email, and you turn off your phone, it’s almost like you don’t exist.”

To really not exist, for your soul to be lost in the darkness, is of course even more serious than learning slower.

If we interact with people “on screen” ten times as much as in person, eschew phone calls because texting is quicker (really because it’s safer); retreat behind a fire wall of email – what does that mean for us? If we devote five months of every year to media, how much more can we take? Forget the tipping point, I think we’re already just trying to keep our head above water. I think we’re at the desperate place.

Now, for a review of the 20th century.

Retrospective: *Bowling Alone*, by Robert Putnam

Robert Putnam talks about “social capital,” the trust between people which makes all social interactions (and most economic ones) work with the least amount of friction, with the least “transaction cost” as the economists say. If you don’t trust someone in business, first, you might not work with them, or, if you do, you may run an excessive number of cautionary checks. Alternately, with social capital (i.e. with someone you trust), all cooperative work runs inordinately smoother.

As Putnam writes, with social capital (pages 288-89):

- communities and individuals resolve conflicts “more easily”
- social capital helps by widening our “awareness” of others, it opens our hearts, makes us more likely to care about others
- when connected, we “cope better with trauma and fight illness more effectively”
- Even for something like job hunting (pretty important for some people these days), there’s considerable evidence that “weak ties,” people we know more distantly, are more important than our strongest ties. People we’re closest to “are likely to know the same people and hear of the same opportunities as I do.” More distant connections are likely to know of different opportunities.

Essentially Putnam talks about the buildup of social capital during the course of the 20th century, into the 1970’s – and its’ collapse since.

The weight of the evidence he presents is overwhelming, to me incontrovertible (and depressing).

Putnam opens with a sobering review of the overall decline. “In 1992 three-quarters of the US workforce said that ‘the breakdown of the community’ and ‘selfishness’ were ‘serious’ or extremely serious’ problems in America.” (p. 25) Many Americans felt we were becoming less trustworthy, feeling that “our society was focused more on the individual than the community.” (p. 25). I.e., we know we have a problem.

In 1976, a study from the University of Michigan looked back two decades and found that:

- “Over these two decades informal socializing with friends and relatives declined by about 10%, organizational memberships fell by 16%, and church attendance... declined by 20%.” (p. 58-59)
- These declines included “unions; church groups; fraternal and veterans organizations; civic groups such as PTA’s; youth groups; charities...” etc. (p. 59)

And these trends would only deepen over the next two decades leading to the start of the 21st century.

Though, as Putnam points out, a countervailing trend is the activist church – and that in fact church involvement is the trait “most closely associated with other forms of civic involvement, like voting... (involvement in) community projects, talking with neighbors...” etc. (p. 67)

POLITICS:

In 1960, 62.8% of Americans voted in the presidential election, vs. 48.9% in 1996 (p. 31-32).

- Between 1974 and 1998, when voters were asked how involved they were in current events, interest had fallen by 20%. (p. 36) (this despite the explosion of political information available on the Internet)
- Roper surveys have found public participation as shown in most measures – signing petitions, writing congress, attending a political rally, etc. declined by 34% from 1973-1994. (p. 44) More distressing, “In 1973 most Americans engaged in at least one of these forms of civic involvement every year,” (p. 44) but “By 1991 *most did not engage in any.*”
- Frankly, people don’t trust the government. Even in 1966, the time of Vietnam and race riots, “66% of Americans *rejected* the view that ‘the people running the country don’t really care what happens to you.’” In 1997, after decades of prosperity, conversely 57% of Americans “*endorsed*” that view. (p. 47)

Apparently we don’t trust each other, the government – maybe not even ourselves.

GENERATIONAL EFFECT

Reductions in civic involvement are concentrated in the younger generation. In fact “each generation that has reached adulthood since the 1950’s has been less engaged in community affairs than” the one before – whether it’s attending church, signing petitions, joining a union, working for a political party, etc.

CHURCHES

Even though right wing and Pentecostal churches have seen great growth, the church overall has been hit.

- Participation in church related groups (aside from just services), declined 50% from 1957-76, and another 20% the next 20 years (p. 72)

GENERAL SOCIALIZING

- Mid to late 1970's people "entertained friends at home 14-15 times a year," which fell in half by the 1990's (p. 98)
- There was a one-third decline in "readiness of the average American to make new friends," from the 80's to the late 90's (p. 100)
- Those who say that definitely "our whole family usually eats dinner together" declined 1/3 the last 20 years of the 20th century (p. 100)
- How about a social evening with friends, or people from the neighborhood – again down a third from 1974-1998 (p. 105)

What are we doing instead? Turning inward, toward our families, ourselves, our houses – and chiefly our beloved TV. 1990-1999 we spent "5-7% more time each on personal grooming, entertainment, sleep, exercise and transportation." (p. 107)

In general there's less doing, more observation. Less time playing a musical instrument, more time going to concerts (or listening to your iPod now, I suppose).

The process of suburbanization has also led to more isolation. Putnam quotes the historian Kenneth T. Jackson:

- "With increased use of automobiles, the life of the sidewalk and the front yard has largely disappeared... There are few places as desolate and lonely as a suburban street on a hot afternoon." (p. 211)
- Commuting is its own isolating factor. We average 72 minutes per day in the car, "more than twice as much as the average parent spends with the kids." (p. 212)

WE ARE MORE ALONE

"The incidence of one person households has more than doubled since 1950." (p. 277)

- 1/3 of all families are single parent households – and we may be headed toward Europe, where it's ½ of all families
- We're so much less likely to be married. In 1974, 74% of all adults were married. It was only 56% in 1998. (p. 277)

TV (ONE OF THE BIGGEST ISSUES)+

- “Husbands and wives spend three or four times as much time watching television together as they spend talking to each other....” and 6-7 times as much as in community involvement. (p. 224)
- 2/3 of kids say the TV is typically on during meals (p. 223)
- TV is the #1 factor in civic isolation: “each additional hour of television watching per day means roughly a 10% reduction in most forms of civic activism...” p. 228 For civic disengagement, “It is the single most consistent predictor that I have observed,” Putnam says. (p. 231) more than how hard you work, how long you commute, your economic status or level of education – all pale next to TV viewing as a predictor of social involvement.
- As researchers Kubey and Csikszentmihalyi wrote, “It seems likely that heavy TV viewing helps perpetuate itself.” I.e., it's addictive – the more you do it, the more you want to. (p. 239)

I can't forget when I was much younger, and people were given an offer: a million dollars, if they would give up TV forever. Most people turned it down.

- We “feel” we know TV personalities and celebrities, but of course we really don't.
- We watch less hard news that could actively involve us in the community.

For example, let's look at the change over 33 years in the percent of people who felt it was important to:

	<u>1965</u>	<u>1998</u>
clean up the environment, keeping up with politics	45%	19-26%
be very well off financially (p. 259-60)	40%	75%

I'm afraid that now we think wash board abs and whiter teeth are more important than connecting to others (got to be ready for the photo op!).

MENTAL HEALTH EFFECTS

(following from pages 326-35)

- From 1950 – 1995, suicide rates for 15-19 year olds have “quadrupled,” and suicide rate for 20-24 year olds “nearly tripled”
- Only 1% of those born before 1955 suffered a major depression, while for those born after, 6% have
- Now 10% of Americans “suffer from major depression”
- A general malaise – sleeplessness, headaches, etc. - is strongly on the rise
- Medical evidence suggests social isolation weakens our immune system, and shortens life. (p. 327)
- Social connectedness is actually as important a factor in overall health as smoking. (You might want to read that again.) So take your choice – quite smoking, or connect with others.

My conclusion: we are more alone, less healthy, and less happy.

CLOSING

When analyzing happiness - civic or social connectedness (being a club member, volunteering, church goer, entertaining at home, etc.) - is just as big a factor as marriage, and money. (p. 333) It's that important.

Nevertheless, there has been a growth of “small groups” in our culture in the last 30 years, even while our overall connectedness has so declined. Half of these small groups are based in churches. Alcoholics Anonymous is another good example. But even these can be about each person addressing a personal need, without so much group bonding.

Still, overall, Putnam says the main countervailing trends are: (p. 186)

1. The rise in youth volunteering - (which has just accelerated recently with the “Obama” effect, of course)
2. “... the Internet”
3. “... grassroots activity among evangelical conservatives”
4. “The increase in self-help support groups”

The total connectedness of the 1950's was also a time for many of stifling conformity, and as Putnam points out the later 20th century was a time of dramatically increased tolerance – for women, ethnic groups, gays, etc. What a world it would be if we could have connectedness and tolerance!

Yet, the social recovery from the changes at the end of the 19th century, as we moved from farms to cities, gives us hope,— and there are strong parallels, as Putnam writes. “America in the last quarter of the nineteenth century suffered from classic symptoms of a social capital deficit – crime waves, degradation in the cities, inadequate education, a widening gap between rich and poor... a ‘Saturnalia’ of political corruption.” (p. 368) Make you think of the political corruption of the first years of this century?

How about the economic comparison? At the end of the 19th century, the top 1% had 40-50% of the wealth, and the bottom 44% had only 1.2% of it.. In 1996, again the top 1% had over half the wealth.

Further, the late 19th century was a time of great technological change – railroads, the telegraph, electric power – wholly changed their world, just as computers and the Internet have wholly changed ours. The late 19th century was a time of rapid population growth, and fear of immigrants (sound familiar?).

But they recovered, and so can we. By 1910 one-third of all US males were in a fraternal organization – people banded together, and so will we. (p. 389)

While Putnam says his analysis is “guesstimated,” I suspect his guesses are better than the facts of the rest of us. He sees these as the major contributing factors for this social breakdown: (p. 283)

10% pressures of time and money

10% suburbanization and sprawl

25% electronic entertainment

50% end of the WWII generation

I find hope in thinking this may just be how the tribe operates. We can only rise up, after we hit bottom. And I sense we are nearing the bottom.

SINCE WE'RE NOT SO CONNECTED, WHAT ARE WE DOING? (lookin' at ourselves...)

Jean M. Twenge's book "The Me Generation" tells it pretty straight. The young generation (roughly those born in the 1980's or later) has concentrated on themselves, expected huge results, increased in cynicism – and despite greatly increased material prosperity, are less happy and less healthy than the WWII or even the baby boomer generation, by far.

Initially, she says, the Me Generation got way too much self-esteem support from their boomer parents. Kids were unceasingly told how wonderful they were. "Our childhoods of constant praise, self-esteem boosting..." have not made our children strong enough. (p.7) Instead of this concentration on self – how do I look, how much money do I make, how happy am I, etc. – as a woman born in 1943 said, speaking for her generation, "the most important things were being honest, hardworking, industrious, loyal, and caring about others." (p. 18)

In the 1990's, 86% of college men had higher self-esteem than their counterparts in 1968 (p. 52). But more than just thinking we're good, we need to be grounded in what it takes for real world accomplishment.

One real price of this "me" obsession is wildly unrealistic expectations. As Twenge quotes from the movie *Fight Club*, (p. 129) – "We were raised on television to believe that we'd all be millionaires, movie gods... but we won't...And we're very, very pissed off."

The mantra is to "just be yourself" (p. 20), but that's not enough.

The most extreme version of this concentration on self is narcissism, a medical condition where we actually "lack empathy" for others. The number of teens who agreed "I am an important person," rose seven times from the 1950's to the 1980's. Further, in the "Narcissistic Personality Inventory," 2/3 of teens in 2006 scored higher than those in 1987. This is widespread. (p. 68)

I can't help but think that more quality social connection with others would be grounding – would make some dreams and effort more practical, less crazily obsessive, and so make life more satisfying.

This generation is so self-absorbed, not even their own children engage them as much. They show a "42% greater drop in marital satisfaction after having children." (p. 94)

Appearance obsession, as Twenge writes, can be seen in high school boys using steroids, in breast implants for girls, teeth whitening, etc. It seems people are more interested in material things and looking good, than in solid personal relationships.

Materialism is key. The number of high school students who say "having lots of money was very important" doubled from 1970's to 1990's. (p. 99) We want to look good, and have the bling to back it up.

It's clear we no longer go along with the group. In a very famous study, Solomon Asch put groups of seven people in a room, and they were shown a set of lines of different lengths. What would you do if the other six people (who were plants), gave an incorrect answer? In 1951, 74% of the solo people agreed with the wrong answer of the plants at least once. They wanted to get along. When the test was done again in 1980, "few people conformed." We had learned to think for ourselves. Which of course is a good thing. (p. 23)

With this relaxing of social norms (or collapse, depending on how you look at it) – politeness, and perhaps basic honesty, has gone out the window. Think of people loudly talking on their cell phone – their conversation is paramount to them – disturbing the other 15 people within earshot seems to mean nothing. Everyone knows cursing is way up – not to mention the raised finger of road rage. Foaming at the mouth in blogs and even emails is fairly common. A congressman yelling "you lie" at the President of the United States, during a state of the union address to the combined houses of congress – what's up with that?

Worse than being rude, in 2002, 74% of high school students admitted to cheating (vs. 34% in 1969).

Things really aren't going so well. Twenge echoes Putnam's work, in noting that before 1915 only 1-2% of Americans had a major depression, while today it's 15-20%. In a "1990's study, 21% of teens aged 15-17" already had had a major depression. It's long been known that isolation and loneliness are major causes of depression, and deepen it. And the definition of depression here is fairly "strict" – the person must be taking medication, or be in "long term therapy." (p. 105-6)

"More than four times as many Americans describe themselves as lonely now than in 1957". p. 110
"...we're malnourished from eating a junk-food diet of instant messages, e-mail, and phone calls, rather than the healthy food of live, in-person interaction."

Twenge notes that half of the GenMe group saw their parents divorce. (p. 117) The dislocation of divorce, the fracturing of their closest human connection in childhood – has left them shaking and fragile.

In the 1970's, I recall, there was a general feeling that divorce was "fine," the kids would be OK. But they weren't.

Besides divorce, in 2003 one-third of all children in the US were born to an unmarried mom. As I said before, it's 50% in Europe, in case that's where we're headed (p. 178.)

Given the challenges they are up against, in an ever tougher economy, without good preparation, GenMe has ended up with much less faith in their own ability to change things. College students' belief that external forces control their lives increased "50%" from the 1960's to 2000's. Sadly, almost all psychologists agree that believing outside forces control you leads to depression and anxiety (p. 157).

With lessening general social bonds, people expect way less from relationships. Sex is often casual, one would say almost emotionally meaningless. In the 1960's, 18 was the average age to lose your virginity – in the late 1990's the average was down to 15. "There's a "disconnect between sex and

emotional involvement.” in the new habit of “hooking up” – i.e., sex without commitment or strong emotional attachment (p. 167.)

Watching TV is a great encourager of sex among teens. A 2004 study found that teens who “watch TV with a lot of sexual content” are twice as likely to have sex. Maybe sex on TV somehow gives teens permission to have sex, they model what they see.

THE SHALLOWEST PART OF ME – *Fame Junkies*

The fixation on self as shown by Twenge is really cast in the harshest light by Jake Halpern, in his book *Fame Junkies*.

When middle schoolers were given five options of what to be in their life, here’s what they chose:

- 9.5% - “the chief of a major company like General Motors” (was asked before the recent economic meltdown of the car companies)
- 9.8% - Navy Seal
- 13.6% U.S. Senator
- 23.7% - “president of a great University like Harvard or Yale”
- and then, a whopping 43.4%, “the personal assistant to a very famous singer or movie star”

Not the famous star themselves, just the assistant. I suppose if being a famous star was on the list, it might have hit 80%. So it’s all about fame, which of course really only has the appearance and promise of value. (p XVI)

This has changed hugely in the past 40 years, with the dominance of media influence. In 1963 the top 20 most admired people in the world included figures like Winston Churchill, Martin Luther King, etc. – but not one entertainment/sports/or media star. In 2005 there were six on the list, from Mel Gibson to Rush Limbaugh (oh my). (p XVI) In 2005 on Yahoo, probably to no one’s surprise, eight of the ten most searched things “were the names of celebrities” (p. 144) Distressingly, teens really are drinking the kool aid – 31% of teens think they will be famous. (p 196).

The *Journal of the American Medical Association* reports that the typical kid will have seen “40,000 murders and 200,000 other violent acts on TV” by the time they’re 18. (p. XXii) The media and celebrity have become our reality – and it’s pretty dark and twisted.

In seeking to find ourselves in the mass of others, we lose ourselves, I’m afraid.

As you’d expect, the more TV you watch, the more it takes over. When teens were given one choice - of being smarter, stronger, more beautiful, famous, etc. – among those who watched TV five hours a day, 29% of the boys and 37% of the girls chose fame (double those who only watch an our a day).

(p 12) If you're famous of course you won't need to be smart, I guess... Sadly, kids who watch five hours of TV a day are also twice as likely to think being famous will makes their families "love them more." (p 72)

This hits teenagers more than the rest of us. As Halpern explains, teens are defining themselves, working out who they are and who they want to be – and fantasizing, in a healthy way, is a big part of that. Imagining and dreaming about different things they might be is natural for them.

As we all feel more slighted, talk faster, and seek more attention (somehow I don't think a TV will ever give us attention) – we urgently seek attention without being willing to give it. I think it's a vicious cycle that has just pushed us further down, leaving us more isolated.

As one celebrity agent said, "We are attracted to what ignores us..." (p. 48) Much of the appeal of stars lies in their aloofness and remoteness. If they don't care about us, they must be cool. Seeking a relationship with someone who absolutely spurns us, though... not promising.

One wise eleven year old, moving away from his acting career, explained why kids want to be famous: "I think people don't want to be lonely. They want companionship, and fame is a substitute for that, I guess." (p. 70)

This is encouraged because we do know so much about the lives of celebrities – you can see how you might think you know them.

Pining for fame might also be due to what some psychologists call "Belongingness Theory" – which posits that the need to belong may be "every bit as urgent as the need for food and shelter." (p 112-113) Basically if you weren't in a group, for primitive man, you were dead. "Belonging was so important in primitive times because it was necessary for survival – people could do different things (hunting, healing), offer more care for the children, be more likely to find a mate and see your child grow up to produce kids themselves. So this need for each other is deep inside us.

While it may seem depressing, that a basic and probably healthy drive, would lead us to hours and hours in front of the TV, I also see it as helpful. If this need is deep in our core, I believe we will find a way to fulfill it in a life affirming way.

Depressingly for the moment, though, Halpern checked the DDB social statistics from 2005 – and found that the *Bowling Alone* downward trend had continued from 2000 – in terms of club meetings, having people over for dinner, and so forth. (p. 145)

SOCIAL INTELLIGENCE, by Daniel Goleman...what about our brain?

Goleman divides the brain generally into two sections, the "high road," the rational, and the "low road," or the more emotional and instinctive. His key point, for me, is that our brain and it's neural pathways mirror what happens in our social life. If we have strong and loving connections with other

people, neural pathways in the brain grow and are strengthened; if not, the neural pathways can decline (p. 41, etc.). If the neural pathways atrophy, the ability to relate to others is greatly diminished. It appears we can literally forget how to love. Still, this impulse to care for others seems to be one of the most basic of all human feelings.

Sociability is demonstrably a survival mechanism. Studies show “that the most outgoing monkeys have the lowest levels of stress hormones, and stronger immune function, and – most important – that they are best able to approach, befriend, or challenge monkeys in the new troupe. These more sociable young monkeys are the ones most likely to survive.” (p. 56)

Our emotional experience is graven into our faces too. “... whenever we gaze at a photograph of someone whose face displays a strong emotion, like sadness, disgust, or joy, our facial muscles automatically start to mirror the others’ facial expression.” (p. 18) Hence the commonly observed phenomena of old married couples starting to look alike (and maybe the odd turn of events recently where I made a great choice for some lamps in our house, and my wife – randomly, it seemed to me – diagnosed a problem in our car).

The happier old married couples were, the more they looked alike (p. 218) – it was the loving face time they’d shared that changed their faces. Emailing won’t do that.

And the more strongly we feel the emotions in the other person, the more our facial expressions match theirs. If we really feel another’s terror, our face shows it. When people are very close, even their breathing will match (p. 31).

The “low road” can pick up fear on another person’s face – sometimes in less than two-hundredths of a second (p. 40). As Goleman writes, this likely is an ancient survival mechanism. When primitive man was out on a tiger hunt, sensing fear in the man close by might save your life.

What does it take to connect? Maybe just trying. “Intentionally paying more attention... Listening carefully, with undivided attention, orients our neural circuits for connectivity...” Not much like being a Fox News talking head, as I see and feel so often in myself. As we become more abrupt, I even find myself more chary of doing things for my most loved ones. I think what I’m doing, what I wanted to finish in the next five minutes, really shouldn’t be interrupted. Keep up with that thought, and you never want to be interrupted. I’ll ask if they can get the last things for supper, rather than just grabbing it myself. I just got on a plane, and the man, seemingly kindly, asked his female partner ahead of him if she would put his display case in the overhead. She replied, “no, I think I’ll let you do that.” Very polite, but you could feel the tension. Neither wanted to be bothered. It’s the sort of irritating thing I do way too often. We want what we want, when we want it, and don’t want anyone to get in the way (kind of a good definition of isolation).

How connected can we be? While I’m twitty at times, my wife and I, married 30 years, will sometimes start thinking of the same thing (a new topic), and both start talking about it at the same time. How can that happen? “There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, Than are dreamt of in your philosophy,” as the Bard would say.

Laughter and tears are triggered in the brain stem, the “oldest part of the brain (p 114) – so connecting emotionally with others is among our oldest abilities.

But, contrary to these connections, our high pressure society encourages and rewards narcissism. The narcissist is one who only cares about himself, and sees others only in terms of what they can do for him. “Michael Macoby, a psychoanalyst who has studied (and treated) narcissistic leaders, observes that the type has become increasingly common in the top echelons of business.”(p 119). Top executive pay, and the associated glamour, has gone through the roof, a mirror of what all of us are seeking. We want to feel important, have our cell phone calls answered the fastest, our tweets followed the most, and of course make the most money. None of which really warms the human heart.

The narcissist, of course, doesn’t care. Another key trait of the narcissist is that they don’t like criticism, and will go to some lengths to avoid it (makes me think of the Bush administration).

When the brain wears down, when the neural pathways for empathy are lessened, we eventually lose most of our capability to connect. If this were to happen to our entire culture, we’d be done. In the extreme case of psychopaths, they actually have little recognition of “fear or sadness on people’s faces or in their voices.” (p. 128). They just don’t get it, and brain imagery shows the blanks in their neural pathways.

When we start, we get many more neurons than we can use – then experience takes over. “Over the course of childhood and the teen years, the brain will selectively lose half of these overabundant neurons, keeping the ones that are used and dropping those that are neglected...” p. 157 “As neuroscientists like to say, cells that fire together, wire together.” (p. 157) Especially in a newborn, “the more often an experience repeats, the stronger the habit becomes and the denser the resulting neural connectivity.” (p. 157)

Failure to connect warmly with others “much research suggests, can have lasting effects... these patterns shape the social brain in ways that make one child grow up delighted with the world, affectionate... (and another) angry and confrontational.” (p. 159)

Which raises the terrifying prospect – could the human race over time lose it’s neural pathways that are required for intimacy? (well, maybe that would take a million years...)

But there’s time, for individuals, up to about the age of 25. “The circuits of the social brain for empathy and for regulating emotional impulses... are among the last parts of the human brain to gain anatomical maturity.” (p. 293) And, as a person, I would say that the human heart can be touched at any age.

When you connect, the brain will actually “secrete neurotransmitters that add a small bolt of pleasure to that feeling of being well loved.” (p. 164) Those “bolts” of pleasure keep us working to connect – and without them, we’re more likely to isolate.

If you’re not convinced yet, here are more medical impacts for being lovingly connected, or not. For men being treated for heart disease, those with the least emotional support had “40% more blockage.” (p. 224) “... data from a number of large epidemiological studies suggest that toxic relationships are

as major a risk factor for disease and death as are smoking, high blood pressure, or cholesterol, obesity, and physical inactivity.” (p 224) Again, stop smoking, or get connected – seems like an easy choice. Yes, isolation is that serious.

Goleman makes a point that “loneliness” doesn’t have that much to do with the amount of time we spend alone, or the sheer number of our social contacts. Having some very close relationships is what we need. “What matters is the *quality* of our interactions in their warmth...”

Not only do we need to be together, we need to touch. Physical touch prompts oxytocin, “a stress hormone ‘down regulator.’” (p. 243) Touch lessens stress – so plugging in your iPod may not always be the best relaxer. Also, at a certain point stress leads to a decline in “mental efficiency and performance.” Stress not only lessens our joy, it can make learning more difficult (p. 271-3)

A study of the poorest neighborhoods in Chicago showed that crime, teen pregnancy, etc. was highly correlated with poverty – but also with social connectedness. Those neighborhoods with more social connections, though equally as poor – had much less crime. Obviously what happens on the individual and small group level sets the mode for the whole neighborhood.

Many studies have shown that the rich aren’t really happier (once a basic level of physical well being is achieved). Yet the *Bachelor* and the rest of the media smother us with the “rich life.” We just have to keep getting more things!

Princeton professor Daniel Kahneman calls this the “hedonic treadmill.” (p 311-312) In a study with a thousand American women, he found that their happiness was most determined by “the people with whom they spent their time – not their income, not job pressures, and not their marital status.” The top ranked things for their happiness:

Friends

Relatives

Spouse or partner

children

clients or customers and other work connections

When it comes to the actual layout of our “social brain,” scientists don’t fully agree (p. 324) on what part of the brain most determines our sociability. Yet they agree that it’s “circuitry that extends far and wide.” Just like our connections extend from us to our friends to the whole planet – strongly or weakly, for good or ill.

BOWEN RESEARCH SURVEY, where are we now?

In a national study of 560 people ages 13 and up, in the fall of 2009, when asked about their relationships with other people:

How fast are other people talking?

42% think others are talking faster, only 4% more slowly

talk more slowly	no change	some faster	a lot faster	so much faster it really bothers me
4%	54%	31%	10%	1%

How much do other people interrupt you?

49% think others interrupt more, only 6% interrupt less

less than they used to	no change	interrupt somewhat more	a lot more	so much more it really bothers me
6%	45%	31%	14%	5%

How much kindness do people show each other?

60% think we are less kindly, only 15% more kindly

act more kindly	no change	somewhat less kindly	a whole lot less kindly
15%	26%	42%	17%

How rude are we?

68% think we are more rude, only 8% less rude

are more considerate	no change	somewhat more rude	shocks me how rude people are
8%	25%	45%	23%

How healthy is the overall connection among people?

53% think it's disturbingly weak/kind of weak, only 12% think it's pretty good/excellent

excellent	good	average	kind of weak	disturbing to me how weak
2%	9%	36%	39%	14%

Conversely, 33% are more connected politically: 4% feel “a lot” more connected, 28% “some more connected.” Still, 44% feel less connected.

The political conversation, in Washington and on TV, etc., is not healthy for 89%: 23% say “they argue much harder than they should, and 67% “they really hardly listen to each other, it’s more like they’re just trading attacks.”

Over half have met people in real life, whom they first met on the internet. Of them, 15% had sex on the first meeting, which sounds a little desperate.

Life is speeding up for 93% of us, and rapidly for most. 31% say it’s speeding up just a little, 46% “a lot,” and 16% “so much it really concerns me where we’ll be in ten years or so.”

46% expect they will use electronic media either some more (31%) or “a lot more” (15%) in the next five to ten years. So this use is just increasing.

See the end of this article for text comments which people just wrote in, for this survey.

Technology came in for a real pounding. Some typical comments:

A lot of people seem to be withdrawing more away from reality and in person speaking and gravitating to the online world.

I have literally seen people dating where they sit across from one another in a restaurant and text and laugh rather than look one another in the eye and speak like normal humans should do

people communicate via text or IM when they should be conversing in person -- breaking up with someone.. saying happy birthday... etc.

Communication is more selfish, combative:

People don't even care about actually relating to each other and view interaction as some sort of contest that they try to win

We always think of what we're about to say next rather than truly listening to the other person...

There was a coming together over 9/11, and also with the tough economy:

when 9/11 happened we drew together as a nation & helped one another & showed support & kindness to one another. It was amazing!

People are generally concerned:

We are de-uniting. We are becoming a more selfish, greedy society.

Branjolina doesn't matter, Tom Cruise doesn't matter, people fill their minds and their energy with such negative, useless stuff.

Not enough involvement in community and caring for others.

I think our country seems more divided than ever when it comes to race, politics, ideas, and how they connect with one another.

*We reached consumers who are somewhat more high tech in their media habits than the national average - still they represent at least 2/3 of the American public.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Here's one of my darker musings on this subject, from about ten years ago.

The Flicker of the Candle

Out of the cover of darkness, rode the soldiers of light, but are they enough?

The quiet voice of the 19th century, a century filled with pure sunlight falling on a quiet English lane, a time of broad, sunlight uplands – this voice was stilled. The hand of God was taken from us, or maybe we dropped it, as we danced in all our primal anger. The dulcet tones of Monet, and the glorious “great baggy monsters” as Henry James called the 19th century novel, gave way to 1914.

Death in the trenches, a mechanized and mindless death, a “chorus of shells” wailing overhead, ushered in the new century. A great darkness fell upon the land, but not the fertile darkness of soil where seeds sleep.

Rather a black night filled with the bursting of cannon, rattle of machine guns, the cut of barbed wire stopping the forlorn platoon.

Blindly we marched forward, desperately seeking the dawn. The touch of the human hand and the flicker of the candle gave way to the softly glowing phosphors of our computer screen; but they don't hug us back (they don't even know we're here)! Television became our only companion, as we sit in an empty room.

Yet, I have hope. As someone said, humans are the most adaptable of all species. Further, as Deborah Boyd the Harvard Fellow, wrote in a Ph.D thesis on teens and online social networks: “When asked teens consistently reported that they would prefer to socialize in physical places without constant parental oversight.” Ultimately, I think, we know what's best for us, that it's best to really connect. We will seek it out, and so will find it.

In his seminal work, *Bowling Alone*, the work which has meant the most to me for this project – sociologist Robert Putnam studied the collapse of social connection which occurred from the 1970's to the start of the new century, but he also looked back at the end of the 19th century, when America moved from a rural to an urban setting. From the village and the farm, to the city and the factory. He describes wonderfully how people in rural life knew everyone, and life essentially never moved faster than the pace of a walking horse. Everything was known in the community, and within reach. This was traded for city life where no one knew anyone, and many worked 12 hour days in inhuman factories. Sociologists, and I suppose people in general, threw up their hands in horror. What had been lost, how could it possibly be regained? But maybe people didn't despair as much as the sociologists, since after all they weren't just thinking about it – they were living it.

Despite all that was lost (and some things like rural poverty were good to lose), the social fabric was woven. We joined clubs, set up societies, came together and touched each other. Many of the major institutions of the 20th century grew incredibly in response to this challenge – like the League of Women Voters, Lions Club, Boy Scouts, local churches, the PTA, the Italian American Club and the

Big Sisters and Big Brothers. We may have been jammed together in cities, but we found a way. And jammed together on the internet as we are, we too will find a way.

Why will we do it again?

1. We are looking for it, and what may seem to be the major bug-a-boo, technology, may even be able to help. Facebook and other social sites, or entirely new approaches, may connect people, bring people spiritual direction and connection to their own still inner self.
2. What bound America together most in the second half of the 20th century was the terrible challenges we faced: the dust bowl, the depression, and the world agony of World War II. We came together because we had to. People who faced and fought down the world evil of Nazism had a group trust it is hard for us to imagine today. Recently, as I was organizing a weekend retreat for my church, I realized I had not trusted a group of people like this since I was in Boy Scouts 40 years ago. For me (with some personal exceptions), corporate life was a meltdown; purely soulless, only about money. But now I am feeling a different spirit.

We are facing the threat of global economic collapse at the worst, and in the US many millions of people and their families with no jobs, two wars overseas, a health care system in the US collapsing under it's own weight. Everyone feels the hole we're in – it's deep, the sides are muddy, and we're trying to look up at the light. If someone else gives me a leg up, I won't forget it.

3. We are the most adaptable of species.
4. I can't believe God means for us to slip into darkness, forever.

The opposite of trust is fear. The opposite of peace is anarchy. If so, then maybe the opposite of faith is aimlessness, and thinking you can only rely on yourself. I think as important as self-reliance, as important as love of self, is trust and reliance on our closest folk, and community.

It may be that I'm better here at describing the problem, than the solution. Though I do feel each person and group has to find their own way. I'm trying to raise the issue, get people aiming at this. Small steps can make a lot of difference. Turn off the TV for one evening, or turn it off early, and do something with your spouse – read together, talk together, be together.

We can't just say no. If you want to cut a child's media time, you have to lead them in a new direction. Offer them other things to do, drive them to the park, support them seeing their friends. Maybe read together, get wild and meditate together, just have five minutes of quiet time together. Maybe you can help them find an inner life and stillness that will hold them in good stead throughout their lives

In my life, my family, faith and meditation have done the most to bring me back down to earth, and closer to spirit. My church community, the local Methodist church here in Half Moon Bay, California, is my larger community. Reading the Bible was my first real experience of faith (have read it through seven times since then). Reading Thich Nhat Hanh was my first exposure to meditation. Though I am

probably more of a solitary intellectual than most, so my experience may not be right for you. (and trust me, I too still struggle with too much media)

I certainly wouldn't want people just running out to join any group – (not the crazy cults, for sure). Finding how to connect might be hard, if you've been relying on the Internet too much.

But people of like minds and hearts can find each other, I feel sure. Above all, I wish you well.

Hugh Bowen
Bowen Research

DIRECT COMMENTS FROM CONSUMERS IN OUR ONLINE STUDY, CONSUMERS GENERAL THOUGHTS ON HOW WE'RE DOING IN OUR RELATIONSHIPS.

I think that people of different ideas, faiths, etc. should listen to each other more. At the very least, hear the other person out. I think the older generation is too stubborn to listen to the other side. And we need to learn from the mistakes of our parents. Doesn't mean you have to agree, but you need to have the forbearance to listen and agree to disagree.

I feel with the addition of social networking, we are connected more. But through the web/email/social networks more than through talking to each other live. those social networks are now a thing to talk about amongst my circle. its a weird personal disconnection, but also a very interactive connection through the web.

The younger generation rely way too much on technology and seriously lack social skills in many ways.

Many people live in their own little "bubble". Maybe, need technology?

I feel like the country is going downhill very quickly because people don't think for themselves anymore, and only mimic what they hear on t.v and what is driven by the media.

We are de-uniting. We are becoming a more selfish, greedy society.

Spend more time face to face with phones turned off.

Until the economy recovers, more and more people will stay into themselves and into their own inner circle as they feel they have to protect themselves

i think its falling apart

ever one just needs to look after each other a little more

The monetary system sucks

I think the only Honest leadership is of a small band or tribe with nothing more than the tribe's interest, are now anti-evolving as a species. The most likely people on the planet to survive, reproduce, and live into the future of a global economy are the richest, dirtiest (ethically), and most inconsiderate of us. they're each just waiting for their turn to speak.

Branjolina doesnt matter, Tom Cruise doesn't matter, people fill their minds and their energy with such negative, useless stuff.

We value celebrities and their unreal real life. We value crimes, shocking stories, and horrible accidents.

I think we have taken several steps back and are much more myopic and self centered then we were a few decades ago.

I like that we have social forums like facebook to reach out to more people that we would normally have in our social circles.

Local government has failed its people severely.

People as a whole have become a lot more greedy.

We need more face-to-face discourse, less reliance on electronic devices and short cuts.

seems we have less and less time to spend on personal relationships.

This online age, this age of 2.0 has disconnected people in so many ways it's not worth arguing. Everyone sees it in their daily lives, yet not many see it for what it is, we've become acclimated to this dis sensitivity.

I think we should get back to some of the basics of communication like using eye contact, being more attentive and being more open to suggestions or different views.

We always think of what we're about to say next rather than truly listening to the other person...

I feel that the Internet has had a major negative impact on how we treat each other as people. We are much ruder than before, and online the attacks are shockingly racist, sexist, and even evil.

Its like an insult media frenzy most of the time

It's a me-me-me society.

I think the more "connected" people get on social networks and cell phone and e-mail, the less we interact on a personal level, the more rude people seem, and the less we seem actually connected on an interpersonal level.

I think that people can connect and get in touch with each other much more easily thanks to the advancements in technology

everyone cares so much about themselves and are so selfish that they will keep the connection further apart. If we were all able to consider each others feelings and begin using less technology again to communicate we can get feelings across easier

Not enough involvement in community and caring for others.

People fake kindness and emotion too much; many people are selfish

If we keep going at the rate we have been, we, as a people, are in real danger of losing connectivity.

I think the advent of mass media and communication shows how narcissistic we are.

I also think that the more technologically dependent we are, the less in-person exposure is to be had for developing interpersonal and social skills.

I feel like everything is more superficial now, due to the internet and technology

No real camaraderie, we only get together as a whole over something negative or bad happens to someone else.

Nobody of the much bigger groups (political, government, etc) are really listening to each other nowadays

Most people are not really connected, mostly superficial relationships

We have developed instant communication before we became responsible and civil enough to use it correctly.

Should focus more on fostering communities with face-to-face contact.

Families could sit down together for dinner, and turn the cell phones and t.v. off!

We need to communicate more and do more face to face interacting

There seems to be a lot more people that shelter themselves on the internet and don't have social skills.

People are beginning to rely on online communication too much.

there is more arguing than talking.

listen to each other and not try to interrupt

use less electronics and more face to face communication

I think people are relying more upon emails and gadgets and we need to do more direct and in-person interaction.

I feel like our country is disconnected from each other despite all our technology.

In times of community trials and need, we see the banding of people helping one another

but I think at some point people will just get sick of it and time spent texting or emailing will get shorter and shorter.

until the economy got bad and families were forced to rely on relatives and everyone has to live together...funny how things/ unseen forces have a way of making people live and behave like they really should.

I feel in my circle of my friends, my relationships are very strong. However, when looking at the world as a whole, relationships are very weak.

I feel like relations as a nation are improving. with social sites such as facebook or myspace, alot of people are becoming better acquainted with each other.

people are becoming more selfish, people have less time to deal with politics, less time to work on having a quality connection with friends & family.

If every person would take 2 minutes to compliment a complete stranger...I feel this world would be a better place.

Technology is a runaway train

I think people are too reliant on email, cell phones, etc. for communication

Seems like we only come together when we are threatened or under attack by another country

Society has given its people the freedom to voice their opinions to the point where no one cares to even listen as long as they get their word out

we need to lay off the facebook

I believe people are still kind and caring and thoughtful, but we've lost any sense of decorum on how to treat each other in person-to-person situations and this frightens me.

I think that there is a lot of fear in the whole country that prevents us as a whole from really coming together.

It's easier to be an asshole through an email than in person.

Egoism has led to selfish and predatory behavior in the workplace and the traditional safety net of the familial structure has been on decline for the last 60 years. This results in people being alienated from one another and from their own selves, and so worried about their jobs that they are not up for being social.

I think we ignore each other more due to technology (ipods, cell phone) people are so into their own thing they tend to ignore others.

We just need to treat one another better and pay full attention instead of texting on our phones or being preoccupied with something else.

No one wants to hear opposing points of view

people (including me) need to do a better job of listening.

I think our country seems more divided than ever when it comes to race, politics, ideas, and how they connect with one another.

Since most of our connections are through electronics, family and close friend ties have gotten worse.

We see a lot more of who someone "really is" at their psyche than we did in school and work social situations prior to the information revolution. For better or for worse.

I think we will distance ourselves more and more from each other as we use technology more and more.

We are being conditioned to have short attention spans.

A lot of people seem to be withdrawing more away from reality and in person speaking and gravitating to the online world.

People don't even care about actually relating to each other and view interaction as some sort of contest that they try to win

When you smile and say hi to someone on the street, they ignore you, or look at you crazy. I think people are losing their inner self and becoming selfish

I just think maybe there should be more balance. Ideally, things like cell phones, e-mail, online communities, etc should make for much better interpersonal relations considering the fact that we have more and faster ways to communicate with each other. But I feel we tend to get a little too caught up in the electronic communication and the in person relations suffer for it.

I believe since our nation has been economically depressed, more and more people have expressed more gratitude towards one another. Online networking has a role in this too. People tend to be more upbeat about things because they're willing to share their everyday life activities with one another via online networking.

People seem much more insular and less willing to connect outside their belief system or circle of established friends.

People seem much more insular and less willing to connect outside their belief system or circle of established friends.

I have literally seen people dating where they sit across from one another in a restaurant and text and laugh rather than look one another in the eye and speak like normal humans should do

Technology has not helped foster close relationships. We need to get back to the era of house calls and meeting people face to face.

when 9/11 happened we drew together as a nation & helped one another & showed support & kindness to one another. It was amazing! now it seems that has been forgotten & people are back to their self-centered ways, rushing through life & forgetting about others. very sad :(we need to wake up & help one another freely again.

people communicate via text or IM when they should be conversing in person -- breaking up with someone.. saying happy birthday..etc.