

Virtual Presence, Social Distancing

by Dennis Dietzel

In this odd time of social distancing, many of us find ourselves in virtual communications for meetings, conferences, or just talking with friends and family. Though the technology is quite amazing, most of us would agree that it falls far short of being in the actual physical presence of other human beings. Virtual communication has vastly improved in the last few years as the underlying technologies have improved—internet speed, hardware, and software—but it is still virtual, not real. I would like to explore how this technology has evolved over time, what it is that we are experiencing and not experiencing, and a few strategies for how we might compensate for some of what is lacking.

I do not wish to discourage anyone from using these virtual communication technologies. There are many obvious benefits: the ability to reach out to many people regardless of geographic location, savings of time and travel resources, and the efficiency of quickly pulling together a meeting. Because of the current times, use of virtual communication has been accelerated way beyond the business and government communities where it has been in use for some years. When we come out on the other side of the virus, I'm sure many will continue to use these technologies in useful ways.

My hope is to bring more consciousness to what we are dealing with. The world of electricity is a world of sub-nature and the playground of the being Rudolf Steiner refers to as Ahriman. This being represents all the cleverness in the material world, active at a level that we as human beings can harness for our uses, but which also can have an almost magical hold on us. In his last *Leading Thought* from March, 1925, Steiner says the following:

In the age of Technical Science hitherto, the possibility of finding a true relationship to the Ahrimanic civilization has escaped human beings. We must find the strength, the inner force of knowledge, in order not to be overcome by Ahriman in this technical civilization. We must understand Sub-Nature for what it really is. This we can only do if we rise, in spiritual knowledge, at least as far into extra-earthly Super-Nature as we have descended, in technical sciences, into Sub-Nature... There can be no question here of advocating a return to earlier states of civilization. ... Electricity, for instance, must be recognized in its true

character—in its peculiar power of leading down from Nature to Sub-Nature. Only the human being must beware lest we slide downward with it.

Anthroposophical Leading Thoughts, March, 1925, Pg 218

Technology

I'll attempt to give a thumbnail overview of the technology. Here are a few significant dates to start with:

- » 1876—first U.S. patent for the telephone by Alexander Graham Bell.
- » 1879—beginning of the current Michael age (according to Rudolf Steiner)
- » 1969—beginning of the internet (ARPAnet, funded by the US Department of Defense)
- » 1980's—World Wide Web began to emerge
- » 1990's—digital phone service supplanted analog

It's interesting to note that the date attributed to the invention of the telephone is in 1876, three years before Rudolf Steiner indicates that the beginning of the current Michael age began in 1879. That these two dates coincide so closely is almost certainly not a coincidence. Perhaps the forces representing Ahriman knew that it was necessary to get a toe-hold before the Michael Age began.

I recall as a youngster in the 1950's that we had a party line where several families shared the same dial tone, meaning that if someone else on our line was using the phone we could pick up and hear their conversation—not exactly a secure situation. My father (a very patient man) would have to ask the neighbor girls, who would play music over the phone to each other, to hang up so he could make a call. I'm sure there are quirky aspects of today's technology that will evoke humor sixty years from now.

The switch from analog to digital telephones made a huge difference in what was possible, especially as phone technology came together with the internet to make it feasible to send not just audio but also video (or any data that can be represented by 1's and 0's) across the wire. Of course, from one end of a digital conversation to another it is not necessarily all on a wire, but can include satellites, cell towers, fiber optic cable, etc. On average an internet connection from your device to a website takes 8 to 12 hops, a hop being from one router/server to another. At each hop your data (voice/video) has to be routed on to

the next spot and to its eventual destination. The internet is literally a web of inter-connected servers with rules for routing and data formatting. The internet was conceived as a very open and decentralized communication protocol with just enough rules to make it work, thus security becomes an issue. It's not a wild west, but close.

For example, on a Zoom call your device has to translate input from the microphone and camera to digital 1's and 0's (including routing information to connect to Zoom), then send it on to your router (probably via WiFi) which connects out to the web where it hops around (8-12 hops) to Zoom where their servers work some magic, then send it back out to everyone else on the call (more hops). In the internet world there are many agreed on protocols for how data is represented and routed. It is quite amazing that it all works as well as it does. Of course, sometimes you get weird boingy sounds or ghost images which could be caused by any number of issues along the circuitous route your data has taken. As the internet becomes better (i.e. faster—think 4G, 5G, 6G...) more data can be sent more reliably and what we see and hear is rendered more realistically. Given our appetite for more virtual communication the march towards faster internet technologies seems inevitable. From this point forward I will refer to virtual communication technology as Zoom, even though Zoom is a brand that is just one of many virtual communication platforms.

The Twelve Senses

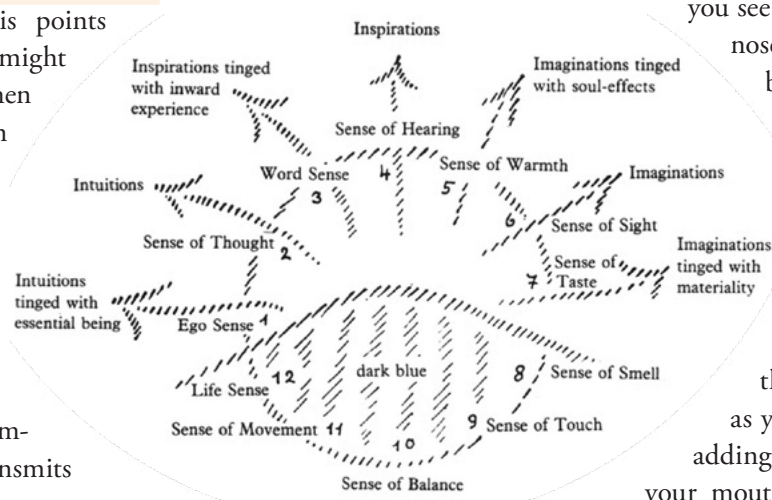
To the familiar five senses—sight, hearing, touch, taste, smell—Rudolf Steiner added seven more—senses of ego, thought, word, warmth, balance, movement, life. It is important to be aware that as human beings we have the capacity to sense much more than sight and hearing, the main senses engaged in virtual communication. This points to the main issue we might be referring to when we say, “These Zoom conversations are okay but not like really being with people.” What happens with all the other senses? Are we able to compensate for the fact that digital communication only transmits

a facsimile of image and sound?

In the series of lectures *Spiritual Science as a Foundation for Social Forms* Steiner speaks about how, through the sense of sight, “we penetrate outward with our soul-spiritual being by leaving behind our organs of sight. Particularly, when we leave our corporeality through the eyes and move about the world, seeing with our soul eyes, yet leaving the physical eyes behind, we arrive in that region where Imagination holds sway.” (pg 43) In relation to hearing he says, “Now when we leave our body through the ear, through the sense of hearing, we come out into the soul-spiritual world and experience Inspiration.” (pg 44) Regarding the sense of warmth, “When we emerge through the sense of warmth, we also attain to Imaginations but to a kind that have sympathetic and antipathetic soul effects, affecting us with warmth or coldness of soul.” (pg 44)

Steiner says much more about the other senses, but the senses at the bottom of the chart he refers to as more inward (life, movement, balance, touch, smell). Of these, we can imagine that we get an artificial sense of movement through what we see on the screen, but usually it is often just a head that we are seeing and then it is only a semblance of movement. The camera captures certain moments in time, but not the continuous movement we sense when in someone's physical presence. The other “inward” senses are not really present in a virtual communication.

The possibilities with each individual sense are numerous, but with the interaction of the senses, as happens in a real-life situation, the possibilities become as numerous as the various human beings that we are. For example, imagine you are walking down the street and smell a freshly baked loaf of bread. You think (from a previous concept), there must be a bakery nearby, and sure enough you see a bakery and following your nose you go inside to be greeted by a friendly person (senses of ego, warmth, life, movement) behind the counter. The sense of warmth, both physical and soul, goes into overdrive and, of course, you buy the loaf of bread and now add the senses of touch and taste as you tear off a chunk (perhaps adding some butter) and put it in your mouth. When we are awake we



are constantly engaged with our senses. We weren't really looking for a bakery, but our sense of smell began a small journey that led us there. This simplistic experience may suffice to illustrate the richness of how our senses interact. How much more our senses are engaged when we are in the midst of an actual human conversation.

If we had never experienced the smell of freshly baked bread, the sense of smell would still have picked up the scent, but we would not necessarily connect it with a bakery. Likewise, if we are on a call with other people it will be different if we have met a person in the flesh before or not. The memory of the other's ego and soul warmth can be awakened by seeing a facial image and hearing a voice, but if we have not met someone before it may still be an experience of the other, but perhaps less full because we haven't had an actual meeting. Earlier in my life, as a musician, I had the experience of hearing recordings of a contemporary avant-garde saxophonist. I just couldn't relate to the music through the sense of hearing alone. I then heard that this person was coming to a local jazz club and I jumped at the opportunity to hear him in person. The music was the same (well, as "same" as jazz can be), but my experience was entirely different. I connected at a soul level that allowed me to hear the music in a way that was not possible before and his music had a profound impact on my life. Even though music would seem to be wholly out of the sense of hearing, my experience was greatly altered by his physical presence and the interaction of the other senses.

For an individual who has always only had carrots from the grocery store the expectation of a carrot is that it is an orange, crunchy, slightly sweet (if you're lucky) vegetable. If, perchance, the same individual happens on a farmer's market and buys a carrot from a biodynamic farmer the previous concept of a carrot is blown away. The flavor, sweetness and crunchiness are beyond anything imaginable. How could I have been deceived into thinking that orange thing from the store was a carrot? Likewise with communication: Are my senses being dumbed down to expect that the sound of someone's voice does not correspond to the movement of their lips?

As a child our family always went to Dr. Meyer when there was an illness. Dr. Meyer's office was full of little bottles, filled with I knew not what, and not smelling particularly good. But that smell was, for me, always associated with healing, and often the very presence of Dr. Meyer in his environment would bring healing; such as the time I went to see him for warts. Several of my friends

were having their warts burned off, so I thought I would go to Dr. Meyer and have him burn off my warts. He looked at my hands and after a few moments of contemplation said, "I think they'll go away on their own." Sure enough within a few weeks the warts were entirely gone. I can't say what was at work here, but something about the interaction with my senses, my conceptual world, my physical body, and Dr. Meyer brought about healing.

Confluence: Lockdown & Virtual Communication

As human beings we have a deep need to communicate, even more so at this time when we are isolated physically from each other. Most of us have experienced various forms of virtual calls: lectures, workshops, church services, friends and family, etc. A confluence of the social isolation, our need to communicate, and the availability of virtual technology has occurred that has brought about the current situation. If the pandemic had happened just five years ago the technology would not have been mature enough to be workable, at least not the visual part of it. Let's consider a few aspects of this confluence.

Before the lockdown there were conferences and in-person meetings scheduled and all was well. All of a sudden these could not happen and choices had to be made. Someone in the group bravely ventured to say they had experienced a Zoom call at work or had just heard about it. Most people looked warily at their device, swallowed hard (not being very tech savvy) and agreed to give it a try. How would it work to bring real spiritual content into a Zoom environment and keep it living? The speed at which Zoom has been adopted is dizzying and my hope is to step back and look at a few situations.

If we consider painting, we can imagine that the sense of sight becomes augmented with senses of color, form, perspective, and balance. It's like an interplay where sight leads to Imagination, then an imagination comes back into sight and into the materials being worked with. It is a back and forth where the painting on the paper influences our Imagination which then comes back to our paper and so on. How is this for painting teachers in an on-line situation? In my experience, the good teacher is able to sense my imagination and to help guide my physical representation through a delicate balance that does not squelch my own creativity. I will leave it to the painting teachers with on-line experience to fill in the details, but it would be interesting to hear how this is working in the virtual space.

The act of making music together with others depends on a heightened sense of each other through rhythm, harmony, and melody. Much amazing music is happening online, but at the expense of the immediacy of the sense of the other musicians. Making music in the virtual space only works because everyone is following a metronomic pulse or a pre-recorded track that keeps everyone together. It is endemic of the technology that there is a lag time (think of the many hops) between individuals on a call and thus it is virtually impossible to respond in real-time to the other musicians. Online music made by musicians who are separated in time and space is a laudable effort at connection, but a poor replacement for a live concert.

Eurythmy is an art form of movement which extends beyond the physical to the supersensible. If one has never experienced eurythmy in real life it may be difficult to experience how the movements and sounds, whether speech or music, are not just physical but also engage the life and soul elements of the human being. Many eurythmists have been working online for some time now and have developed ways of communicating what one is attempting to do with the body and spirit. As with any art, expectations must be managed so that we know that a full experience can only be had when all our senses are engaged.

We may all be familiar with the phenomenon of creating an on-line personality in the social media world that is quite different from one's real self in the flesh. With a Zoom call one can modify the background that others see—this morning I am at the beach, in the afternoon at the library, in the evening I am in Paris. It is easy to imagine that in some future release we will be able modify the look of our faces. Perhaps I want to look a little

more rosy-cheeked or less wrinkly or whatever, and with a virtual filter I will look 10 years younger. I don't mean to judge those who use virtual backgrounds, but it can be misleading and potentially untruthful (of course, it can also hide the fact that I haven't cleaned up the pizza boxes for a few days).

If one is a presenter in a physical gathering one gets immediate feedback from the participants through various senses that allows one to adjust timing, content, or whatever. In an online situation, it can feel that you are talking to silence. People may mute their audio, or turn off their camera, and though feedback may come later, it is difficult to get an immediate feel for what is happening for participants. It is perhaps more efficient to present virtually because, assuming one is prepared, one can just go through with the presentation with very little alteration; whereas in a real-life situation stuff happens that throws the plan off-track. A bit of alteration and even improvisation is often called for to meet whatever is happening. Of course, in the Zoom world, all kinds of technical issues can come up that require last minute changes as well.

I had the opportunity to chair the meetings of the General Council of the Anthroposophical Society for several years. Many of our meetings were audio calls with a few physical meetings each year. I came to learn that certain topics of a deeply spiritual or contentious nature were best dealt with when we were physically together. In my experience, the sense of warmth (antipathy and sympathy) is particularly reduced when we are not together physically, and it is important to fully experience these around difficult issues. Our ability to fully experience our antipathies and sympathies and not be overcome by them

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has to do with the good will with which we meet each other and the artfulness of how the gathering is held. Past and future karma is in the making which requires full human presence with all our senses. This is still true on a Zoom call. Though we see each other's faces, we are still not able to be as fully present to each other as when we are physically together.

Another situation which arises at a physical gathering is the seemingly chance meeting with another individual. These meetings can be comfortable or not, but also are opportunities for karmic working with each other. When we leave a conference these karmic meetings can be the most valuable thing we take away. It may not be impossible but is much less likely to happen in a virtual meeting. Somehow the random breakout rooms that one can experience in a Zoom call lack the individual will or interest in the other that often leads to a real meeting.

In anthroposophical gatherings, we often begin or end our meetings with a verse. A verse may invite the presence of other spiritual beings to accompany and help our work. What does it mean to invoke the presence of a being such as Michael into a virtual space? The following quote might shed some light:

Michael himself, in his essential being, does not wish to come into contact in any way with the physical present in earthly life. He wishes to remain in the nexus of forces, which existed for spirits of his kind, and for human beings, **in the past**. Any contact with that with which, in present earthly life, man is **obliged** to come in contact—this Michael could only consider as a pollution of his being. (pg 122)

The emphases are Rudolf Steiner's.

Michael can only come as close to the earth as the realm of life—the etheric. This being cannot come into the realm of the physical earth much less the sub-nature of electricity. As human beings we must raise ourselves up to this etheric realm to enter into communion with Michael. This activity is also known as the “reverse ritual.” We must be careful of our expectations of other spiritual beings when we meet virtually. Are there practices that can invoke the mood we are trying to create without compromising the spiritual beings we want to participate with?

Rudolf Steiner explains this in the Michael Letter, “Hindrances and Helps to the Michael Forces in the Dawn of the Age of the Spiritual Soul” and the Leading Thoughts numbers 132, and 133. (*The Michael Mystery*, December 14, 1924, GA 26)

What to do?

Zoom technology is happening and will continue to happen in ways we cannot even imagine at this point—science fiction being everyday reality. There will be some who will resist but most of us will accept this as the new norm. From my considerations above, I hope it is apparent that we must remain awake to the opportunities and as well as the limitations of virtual technology. As the technology gets better, the lines between reality and virtual reality will become more blurred. Being truly human requires the full integration of all our senses and awareness of both the physical and the spiritual worlds.

We might liken this to the advent of the printing press. Prior to widespread printing, words were primarily communicated from mouth to ear in the physical presence of the speaker and the listener. With printing the words became present on paper and their life depended on the individual reader bringing them back to life. How do we bring life and humanity to virtual technologies? Can we redeem this realm of Ahriman so that goodness can be served?

Amazing things are happening online. When a virtual conversation is handled well one can experience at times that there are almost two conversations happening: one through the electronic technology with all its limitations and one on a spiritual level. Lighting a candle and other simple rituals can be a help. Taking a moment out of our online talking to imagine the others on the call, not from the view on the screen, but as full human beings. This is, of course, easier to do if we have already met people in the flesh, but worthwhile in creating the spiritual conversation.

If we bring a conscious awareness of our full humanity and all our senses can we, in some small way, transcend the technology while at the same time recognize its limitations? Perhaps we are preparing for a future where physical presence is less important and our communion with each other will be purely spiritual. And let us not forget the hidden (at least not mentioned by Rudolf Steiner) thirteenth sense of humor, without which we would certainly fall prey to the dehumanizing forces of fear and hopelessness.

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