Technology and the Language of Bodily Presence

Mary Stanford

Though purveyors of modern technology boast of connecting the world like never before, human beings, paradoxically, are finding themselves in a state of near-pathological disconnection from one another. Why are our young people struggling to converse, concentrate, and create when they have been equipped with state-of-the-art tools designed to stimulate them socially as well as intellectually? A common denominator of modern developments in technology is that the human body itself is playing an ever-diminishing role in human relationships. From the telephone and voicemail, all the way to email and texting, our culture has been gradually retreating from actual physical encounter in daily interaction in favor of more and more disembodied modes of communication between persons.

Could this routine circumvention of the body be responsible for much of our younger generation’s difficulties? John Paul II’s *Theology of the Body* provides keen insight on this very issue. Too often reserved for conversations about marriage and sexual ethics alone, John Paul’s work here is precisely what it claims to be: a profound analysis of how the body factors into the identity of the human person as a whole. John Paul examines the question of who we are as human persons—and specifically

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how we come to know ourselves and others—drawing from the Book of Genesis for wisdom.

In the second creation account, man is seeking to know who he is and for what purpose he has been made—and yet we witness him come to such a discovery in a very particular way. Initially, he comes to sense his superiority—his likeness with God, in fact—as the animals are presented to him. Though possessing a physical dimension bearing some similarity to that of the animals (John Paul describes him as a “body among bodies” [TOB, 6:3]), Adam immediately realizes that he has more in common with his Creator than with his fellow created beings. It is he alone who converses with his Creator, he alone who exists in a state of intimacy with God, a condition in which no other being in the physical world is capable of abiding, because it is a spiritual connection—an invisible dimension no animal shares with him.

In observing and naming these creatures, then, Adam comes to a partial knowledge of himself, but primarily a knowledge after the fashion of a via negativa. He realizes what he is not; the animals are not truly fitting companions for him because he cannot identify with them. They lack that interior element which would make such an identification possible. For a deeper, more complete self-knowledge, Adam must wait until the woman is presented to him by God. Upon seeing her, the first man notably exclaims, “This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh!” (Gen. 2:23) For the first time in creation, we witness an expression of human joy. But what John Paul emphasizes here is that, at this moment of beholding the woman for the first time, Adam is not merely fixated on the beauty revealed through her sexual difference. We are not to imagine him with eyes wide and jaw dropped, declaring, “Wow, look at you!” Rather, in recognizing the resemblance her body bears to his own, the first man “simply affirms the human identity of both” (TOB 14:4). It is as if Adam says “Wow, look at me! That’s what I am!” and his self-knowledge is perfected through her.

It is precisely in encountering another—noticeably different from, yet in a more profound way like himself—that Adam more fully knows himself. Though she is not a replica of the man, the woman’s physical similarity to him is what at once reveals to him that invisible dimension which sets them both apart from the animals. The human body—directly encountering another human body—is essential to the process of affirming one’s own identity. With one glance at her similar body, Adam knows she possesses a similar spirit—that she, like him, is more than simply a physical being. Adam does not have to reason abstractly to this truth; he knows it intuitively with one look at her body. That’s the
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power of the body, which John Paul describes as a symbol, something visible which immediately reveals an invisible truth (TOB 9:4). Eve's body reveals her humanity, her inner likeness, to Adam, and he rejoices in this discovery. Such a joyful response equally provides a confirmation of her own identity. Adam's words are a sign that he is welcoming her, that he is receiving her as a gift from the Creator. His response communicates to her that she is special; she is, like him, a being above the animals, a being of surpassing worth. John Paul explains that she "discovers herself" thanks to the fact that she has been accepted and welcomed ... and thanks to the way in which she has been received by the man" (TOB 17:5).

It truly is fascinating, even in everyday life, how we come to know ourselves more fully when we physically encounter others. I often ask my Christendom students who have just returned from their Rome semester how much better they came to know not just one another, but themselves—after traveling together, after an intense trip where they were thrown together side-by-side in sometimes challenging conditions. Without fail, their knowing nods confirm for me that the superficialities of freshman year have given way to a new depth of knowledge of one another, and in that process, a deepening knowledge of self. Spouses, after years of living in such close daily contact, no doubt could tell tales about the virtues and faults of one another; and yet, it is fruitful to ponder the ways in which such close encounters shed light on one's own identity as well. When our lives "bump up" against one another in such an intimate way, every day, we discover much about ourselves through our spouse's or child's responses, through his or her reactions to our own behavior. And what we discover about ourselves in this process isn't always pretty.

The fact remains, however, that without such moments of self-discovery, we cannot grow. Indeed, we risk stagnation, or at the very least our self-image may be skewed because there is no one to respond to us, no one to provide a reflection, so to speak, of ourselves. (An illustration of this dynamic may be found when we observe that a person born with a hearing loss often speaks imperfectly; without the sense of hearing, he was not able to receive the feedback necessary to correct his pronunciation early on.) The point is that we need feedback to understand ourselves, to know who we are.

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But in fact, corrective feedback is of only secondary importance to the development of every human being. What is most essential to providing a foundation for one’s identity is the affirming, loving response of those closest to us. This is a fundamental principle of human relationships according to John Paul. When a person in his fullness as a gift, as a person of immeasurable worth and dignity, is welcomed by another—as Adam rejoiced when he first saw Eve—only then does that person begin to understand himself to be so. Only then does he begin to grasp the fullness of who he is (TOB 17: 3-6). Such is the pattern of our existence from its very beginning.

Human beings do not come from a cabbage patch, or a medical lab. God designed it so that each one of us, from the first moment of our existence, would emerge directly from the heart of a family, an already-existing, intimate, bodily community of people—and our self-image is meant to develop and flourish in this very concrete and visible context. This tiny community rejoices at our existence, and this rejoicing helps us to know our place in the world. Renowned retreat master Fr. Jacques Philippe echoes this principle: “We need to be looked upon by someone who says, as God did through the prophet Isaiah, ‘You are precious in my eyes, and honored, and I love you.’ ... We urgently need the mediation of another’s eyes to love ourselves and accept ourselves.”2 There is nothing abstract about this experience; it is one little person—a baby—being looked upon, cooed at, spoken to and touched, fed, snuggled, held for the first year or so, but accompanied for much, much longer by loving parents—and sometimes siblings, too. And through such daily bodily encounter, the child comes to know who he is.

That the world today has provided innumerable threats to such a beautiful and life-affirming dynamic requires little explanation. Certainly, practices such as fornication, cohabitation, and divorce each risk depriving children of that stable, loving, identity-affirming environment which is their birthright. It is in this context that our culture’s movement toward ever more disembodied forms of social communication must also be viewed with concern. By disconnecting a person from embodied relating with those who are placed in his most intimate circle of daily contact, our use of such technology has brought about a lack of presence in our closest relationships—those which are designed by the Creator to affirm and to help form our being. As a result, such use threatens to leave many crippled in their self-understanding and stunted in their identities.

The body, which from the beginning served as a powerful symbol for our first parents—
making them each immediately aware of one another’s humanity—is what makes us present to the world. When we are met with the possibility of relating to others through our devices rather than through our bodies, however, a strange paradox occurs: we become insensitive to those in our bodily presence. Spouses, children, siblings—those most closely connected to the formation of one another’s self-image—are being ignored in favor of matters or persons essentially abstract from us. Opportunities to converse, to offer a sympathetic ear, or simply to enjoy one another’s company in silence are being lost as a result of our absorption with persons and things at a distance from us.

When every family has so many devices that each member is able to make his own choice of entertainment, we not only miss out on developing our ability to compromise, but we lose the unique joy that comes from a shared experience. Children consistently reveal an inner desire to share their experiences with their families. Any mother or father who has ever been to a swimming pool with a six-year-old no doubt has heard, “Watch me!” countless times. It does not matter who at the pool has witnessed his trick on the diving board; he will continue to shout until his own parent witnesses his feat. The child requires a witness; he craves being “looked upon,” but not just anyone will do. We parents sometimes undervalue the power of our own presence to our children—and feel that we are wasting time if we are not “accomplishing” something, getting something “done.”

This is a dangerous attitude that prevails in our culture and flies in the face of the truth that our children come to know and value themselves in the loving presence of those who mean the most to them: their parents and siblings. In a fruitful family life, sometimes true “quality time” is in fact identical to “quantity time”—time marked less by activity than by availability, by an attentive presence that invites loved ones to approach each other face-to-face with their thoughts or feelings. Such moments of undivided attention for one another may be experienced as a waste to a busy adult, but are in fact critical to a child’s developing sense of identity and security. Looking away from a screen and into a child’s eyes is a physical sign that one is truly receiving and appreciating him.

Another feature of our bodies, in their concreteness, in their physicality, is that they limit us. Our bodies confine us to a certain space and time. We can’t bilocate; we can’t time-travel. The very meaning of presence is that we are here, now: this place, this time. Such a condition necessarily limits our reach. The challenge posed by
modern technology, however, is that it carries within it a certain promise of infinity. Look at all the friendships one can make, rekindle, or sustain; time, distance, and quantity no longer seem to be an issue. What is being experienced, however, is an increasing superficiality in our engagement, both in relationships and in the intellectual life. Our limited bodies are not made to relate to a thousand “friends,” just as our limited brains are not meant to spend twenty-four hours a day reading. No human being can finish reading every intriguing article on the internet, but the problem is that too few are even bothering with the effort. After so much skimming, our minds find it difficult to read closely and to follow a sustained argument. Much like our stomachs, which shrink after periods of fasting, our attention spans shrink after a steady diet of skimming.

College professors have testified that despite the incredible accessibility of research materials available to students writing papers, the students’ abilities to engage an argument deeply are suffering because of the false sense of the infinite that technology offers them. Their powers of concentration are wearing out by being pulled in so many directions. Their devices are a gadfly that never ceases to stimulate, but never leads them to satisfaction. Is it any wonder that our young people are struggling to pray when they so seldom experience stillness?

Perhaps the most powerful feature of the body as experienced in human relationships is the sense of shame attached to it. The moment John Paul directed us to in the Book of Genesis was the proverbial “calm before the storm,” that beautiful moment when Adam and Eve stood before each other, joyful in one another’s presence, and, mysteriously to us in the fallen world, “naked without shame.” Since the moment of Adam and Eve’s original sin, the experience of shame has always been part of the human experience. When we consider them hiding their bodies from one another with leaves,

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we see that shame was, from the beginning, a physical experience, but one which indicated that something had gone spiritually awry.

The human body was not the source of that first sin; the source of sin is man’s spirit, in the way he misused his freedom to indulge his desires at any cost. But the body was, and continues to be, the place where shame is experienced. The body is the locus of shame. And shame always arises when sin arises, whether it is one’s own sin, or whether one
is in danger of becoming victim to someone else’s sin. Shame is a protective indicator—manifested through a physical response: a covering-up, a blush, a failure to meet another’s gaze. It is precisely in the community of other bodies that we are most aware when someone crosses a line. We come to know ourselves in community, right or wrong.

When our communication with others begins to lose its bodily element, the first thing that disappears is shame. When encounter with the human body is not central to our relationship with someone, the warnings and signals that shame sends out go unnoticed. Why are people texting and posting things online that they would never have thought to do in someone else’s physical presence? Because they were not in someone else’s physical presence.

We can no longer wonder why children are sending bullying messages or pornographic pictures and texts to one another. Their God-given means of sensing evil—their bodies—are being circumvented. Like a numb hand in a flame, these children are not feeling a painful warning, and they will get burned. When we fail to encounter a living body, we can fail to grasp the depth of the whole person, and it becomes that much easier to think of fellow persons as simply objects.

And the objectification that occurs today is not only on a sexual level.

Young people, indeed all people, are seeking friendships; as they put themselves out there on their pages and posting their pictures, they are looking for a response. They crave “likes” and comments, and are hurt when their thoughts or pictures are overlooked. How disappointing it must be when one has 1000 supposed friends! That “sense of the infinite” that technology brings only magnifies the pain of rejection when someone is ignored. Human beings, particularly the young, desire and deserve welcoming acceptance. Such is a natural part of human development. Authentically personal affirmation of the kind that John Paul II describes, however, can never be achieved through a disembodied way of relating. It can only come from the concrete intimacy that we experience in everyday community life—in the presence of real, live family and friends.


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