Raiders of the Lost Art

It's a brave new world and change seems to be the norm, the motto, and the panacea to its tribulations. Apprehension is in the air; trepidation around the corner. You can feel it lurking, sinister, up to no good.

Is it the financial crisis? No worry there, just print more money. The Influenza Pandemic? Sure, when pigs fly or birds wallow. Climate change? Yes, it always has and always will. No, this is something more subtle; an undercurrent gently sweeping across the societal landscape.

We are slowly losing the art of communication. Don't believe it? Tweet your peeps or text your teenager. See what they say or don't say. The glorious evolution from pictographs to Shakespeare is now declining to digital grunts and tawdry tweets. Face time gives way to Facebook, expression is replaced by emoticons, and the nimble thumb is now the voice of a new generation.

How did this happen? How did we ebb from Kipling to Kardashian? How are millions captivated by Paula Abdul's quest to form a coherent sentence while Huxley's new world remains unexplored?

Do we really care what Lance Armstrong is eating for breakfast and with whom? Do we need to know what Amy Winehouse is rehabbing from this week? We already know what Karl Rove thinks, so why belabor the point? Is Taylor Swift really behind those tweets or is she tweet-synching? Maybe it's a tweet double or Twitter assistant?

Why would anyone want to broadcast their every move? Why would anyone want to stalk someone's every move? "Yea, Britney went number two in the loo." Oh yeah, money. She tweets and you download a song. He blogs and you give to his cancer foundation. Follow the hash-tag to find the money. But in the process, we are losing the art of communication.

"But Gary, from an engineering standpoint, it's more efficient." Is it? Efficiency is a double-edged sword. Sure, one aspect of efficiency is performing with a minimum of wasted time, effort, and resources. However, an equally important aspect of efficiency is performing in the best possible manner. It cuts both ways. If your communication is ineffective, it doesn't matter if it is quick, ubiquitous, or efficient.

Now the bad news: I regret to report that engineers have their fingerprints all over the crime scene. Those in our own profession are the very raiders of the lost art of communication. You don't need a code from Da Vinci to realize that leaving the redesign of social networks in the hands of communications engineers is not the best of ideas. Would you consign to Robin Williams timidity, John Madden flight, or Janeane Garofalo tea parties? No, it's not in their nature. So why hand over social relations to a communications engineer?

Come on, I love engineers. I was one once, but you don't turn over social networking to the prodigies who preferred calculating instantaneous rates of change to cultivating colleagues and companions. Most engineers are lucky if they find a Sancho Panza, let alone pursue the impossible dream of wooing their Dulcinea.

Okay, maybe I'm being too harsh. Engineers are amiable blokes and cordial lasses, but it is a tell-tale sign if you are invited to the party to wire the sound system rather than to be wired. If the only buzz you get is electrical in nature, it should cause you to pause and think.

I know someone has to roll up their sleeves to parse ambiguous requirements, calculate complex algorithms, decipher convoluted code, and exploit volatile technologies. Not everyone can garner fulfillment from extended screen exposure, elusive bugs, fast Fourier transforms, and five lines of über-efficient code. We need you, we value you, please stick around—but realize to communicate is human, not mechanical.

Here are a few suggestions that may help you digitally degauss and socially recharge.

1. Turn off the computer. Leave your cell phone and iPod at home. Invite family or friends on a walk. Talk about anything, but talk the whole walk. If you are not talking, stop walking. When you start talking you can walk.

2. Read a book. Not a technical manual, not a comic book ... and you can't use your Kindle. Preferably classic literature (but not from iPhone's "Classics" app). Don't race to the end; instead, savor the story.

3. Take in a live concert, musical, play, or comedy.

4. Learn the basics of human communication—transmission, reception, as well as verification and validation—without the use of technology.

5. Add someone to your design team who knows absolutely nothing about technology or can recount the salient points of "Les Misérables" in one minute.

The very technologies designed to bring us together are keeping us apart. They promote isolation instead of collaboration. It's like the New Yorker who proudly pronounced to his country cousin, "Everything I need—my office, my apartment, the grocery store, the drug store, and theatre—are all within a city block. I never have to leave." His cousin scratched his head and inquired, "And that's a good thing?"

In designing our brave new world—where everything is a click away—remember to ask yourself if that's a good thing.

Let Britney go and spend some time with Billy, the Bard of Avon. "O wonder! How many goodly creatures are there here! How beauteous mankind is! O brave new world! That has such people in't!"[1]

…not sent via my BlackBerry, my iPhone,
Twitter, or carrier pigeon.
—Gary Petersen, Arrowpoint Solutions, Inc.

Note

1. Shakespeare, William. The Tempest. Act V, Scene I.

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