The Anthropology of the Cell Phone

By David Kraemer

As I wander through the streets of the city, watching the endless human traffic that typifies the sidewalks of Manhattan, I am forced to wonder what long-term effect the cell phone will have on who we are. I say that "I am forced to wonder" because the cell phone has become absolutely ubiquitous. On each and every block, one individual after another blabs away on his or her ever-smaller phone, present in the sidewalk crowd in body but hardly in spirit. Increasingly rare is the individual who merely walks from here to there. (What I say here about the sidewalk could easily be applied, *mutatis mutandis*, to those who travel by car and have also taken to spending extended periods of time on their cell phones.) What do we gain—and what do we lose—with this drastic change in everyday human experience?

One could argue that the cell phone facilitates greater human "connectedness." Whereas it was once, not long ago, impossible to be in touch except when one was in the vicinity of a "land line," it is now rendered possible to converse with one's friends or loved ones no matter where one happens to be (the subway is still a notable exception). If we deem such social contact "good," then we must acknowledge the positive contribution of the new cellular technology. Following this line of reasoning, which emphasizes the relationship enhancing qualities of the cellular revolution, we might imagine a future (in technologically advanced societies) in which humans have become more social, more supportive and, we would hope, more caring. In this scenario, the cell phone is a genuine blessing.

But I have my doubts about this picture. It seems to be that cell phone conversation is not about deep conversations and enhancing relationships (except to the degree that merely saying "hello" enhances relationships, which I do not deny). Cellular conversation conducted in transit is not about serious engagement. If my hundreds of overhearing experiences are representative, typical cell phone conversations range from a quick and informative "I am on my way home" to a time-filling "hey dude, whassup?" (or its gender and culturally translated equivalent). And if I am correct in judging that this latter type of exchange is most typical, then the proliferation of cell phone conversations represents not an urgency to be in touch, but a need to escape being alone with oneself. In fact, even if the intended purpose of cell phone dialogue is not such escape, it is nevertheless its inevitable consequence. And this, I would propose, has profound implications for our personhood.

Permit me to explain. Not long ago, the walk across town or the drive to the mall (if one was alone) was a time to let one's mind wander. In the space of these minutes, be they few or abundant, one could "day-dream," carry on a conversation with oneself, or respond internally to some ambient stimulation. While "day-dreaming," one could travel to far-away places, imagine new projects for home or work, create playful scenarios for one's future, or just "veg out," that is, let one's mind rest in a kind of nondescript, meditative state. In the course of an internal conversation, one could debate with oneself about the best thing to do in this setting or that. One could formulate a memo or write the first chapter of a book. One could prepare a speech or argue about politics, all the while taking pleasure in the fact that all of this was done with oneself. And, intermittently interrupting these other psychic activities, one might notice a passerby, be inspired by a nearby vista or elegant architectural ornament, or be disgusted by some filth in the street. None of this would happen in an organized or directed fashion. In the space of a few minutes, one's mind could go off in all of these directions. Precisely because of its unstructured quality—like the unstructured play that is so important for children—this time could restore one's spirit and could impart the elation of an imaginative journey. Yet this time is becoming rarer and rarer, and I fear that we will be the poorer for it.

The truth is that the art and pleasure of solitude are acquired only with practice, yet the times to practice are being slowly stolen from us. At work, we don't have them because we are not supposed to. At home, obligations and, more often, the TV command our attention, and keep our minds from wandering off. And now, during the time spent between home and work, during the time in which we used to be left to ourselves, our attention is increasingly directed to small talk, to talk that, however socially affirming, steals from us time that we need for ourselves.

What will be the long-term consequences of the diminution of these unstructured inner experiences? I imagine (will I even be able to do that in the future?) that we will be less at ease, less creative, less productive and less healthy. We will forget how to be with ourselves and, as a result, become less adept at being with others. After all, if we have no time to be alone with, and get to know, our own souls, how can we share our souls with others? And if serious relationships require the honest baring of one's soul, we must predict that intimate relationships will suffer. Ironically, the device that seems to enhance relationships may, in the end, harm them. I hope I am wrong. But what if I am not?