

The Human Need for Community: Cyberspace or Face-to-Face?

By David Kraemer

When I leave my office, a little after 5, and walk across Grand Central to the shuttle entrance, I am thrilled and uplifted... The crowds, the lights, the varied noises, all blending in the greatness of the place to the minor notes of a city symphony-all of these give me a gift of beauty for which I never cease, even in the horrors of my subway jam, to be grateful.

-- Esther Levy, February 1929

It seems to me that humans are, in their very nature, social animals. This does not mean that all humans require social contact; unusual persons will be quite happy living as hermits. It also does not mean that we always require the company of others; obviously we all benefit from moments of quiet and solitude. But the vast majority of us require the regular company of others--we thrive on it, we are entertained by it, we are comforted by it.

That this is so does not require that we understand why it is so. Still, it is worth speculating on some of the sources of our social nature. I suspect that evolutionary scientists would explain it as a mechanism serving the perpetuation of the species. In order to reproduce, we obviously must meet other humans with whom we might reproduce. Hence, we seek out the company of others. Whether or not this is so, there is obviously an ambient "eroticism" in social settings-the beautiful people, the stolen glances, the provocative pose, all contribute to the "charge" of large crowds. But, more importantly, there is simply the pleasure and joy of social exchange-the serendipitous conversation shared with the smiling friend or companion. And, to be honest, there is simply something exciting about viewing humanity in its extraordinary variety, the infinite "others" who are like and not like us at the same time.

Proof of our social nature is everywhere. It is to be seen in movie theaters, which have thrived despite the proliferation of TVs and VCRs. It is not the size of the screen that matters; it is the hush and laughter of those sharing the experience of viewing. It is to be seen at the stadium, where thousands sit distant from the field, barely able to see the players, despite the fact that they can far more easily watch the game at home in the comfort of their living rooms. And it is to be seen in playgrounds, which percolate with excitement when backyard swing sets sit

idle. The simple fact is this-it is more fun to do "it," whatever "it" may be (there are exceptions), in the company of others.

Of course, it is our social nature that impels us to seek communities. And this is why, with all of the ways the computer revolution will change our lives, few will find meaningful "communities" on line. On-line communities are mediated through wires and hardware. They are missing the glance, the voice, the touch, the warm breath. However the current technologies are improved, it is impossible to recreate the full experience of being in the same space as another. The voice we already transmit over distances (the phone did this; the computer does it no better). The glance will come, though it will be confined in a box of glass and plastic. Nothing can recreate touch and warmth, and nothing can substitute for real presence-the collection of two or many people in the same place at the same time. This explains why, along with the proliferation of computers, we have witnessed the proliferation of Starbucks. It also explains why Esther Levy's report (quoted above) continues to ring true. Visit Grand Central on line. Then go to the real place. The difference between the two experiences is too vast to describe. Check out the Times Square web cam. Then walk the sidewalk pictured on the web cam. Nothing can compare to the experience of noise, color and hustle-bustle that the real thing offers.

God, as quoted in Genesis, got it right: "It is not good for man to be alone." The wisdom of this simple observation is undeniable. We deny it at our own peril.

