Editorial: The Repeal of Reticence and the Need for Connection: A Note on the Internet

By M. Ali Lakhani

Set bounds about the mount, and sanctify it.
Exodus, 19:23

Greater "connectivity" does not necessarily mean greater "connection."
His Highness the Aga Khan: Stephen Ogden Lecture, Brown University

We live in an age where reticence has ceased to be a virtue. The adage that prudence is a hallmark of wisdom is in danger in our times of being interpreted as a justification for political correctness rather than as a reminder of the need for inner order, of the principle that form entails conformity to the Spirit. How could it be otherwise in an age of increasing faithlessness and eroded restraint, where the abnormal has become so normal that it has all but lost its power to either shock or shame?

In such an age it is inevitable that the soul will pine for a sanctuary, for a space that is sacred, and that this in turn will give rise to a temptation for it to seek this space in other than the world, perhaps in the recesses of its own subjectivity. This temptation is particularly insidious in the Internet era where the lure of seemingly infinite portals to virtual universes and myriad 'avatars' can offer an entrancing sanctuary to the soul from the 'real' world beyond the screen, as well as to a 'community' of relationships based on safe boundaries that one can seemingly control.

But the largely unregulated Internet is in fact a dangerously predatory world, enticing both ideological and sexual prey, and is therefore not the sanctuary or community that a naive user might at first imagine.

Rather, it is yet another intrusion of the world into the soul, beguiling it to embrace the ephemeral and to eschew 'permanent things'. Its virtual medium disconnects us from reality and thereby from our own humanity while purporting to offer us greater connection. The more we live in our screens, the less we live in life, locked into the prison of our own subjectivity and absent from the world around us, siphoning experience secondhand rather than through presence and the miracle of our God-given senses.

What happens when one becomes so intent on virtual living as to be absent from reality? It is not just that people become redundant. So too does the world. One can already sense this happening in the quality of our outward attention, as where, in our eagerness to capture the image in a digital camera, we no longer even bother to look at its presence. But, more profoundly, it is also our inward attention that suffers, as for instance in our reductive focus on the 'bottom-line' or in our urge for instant gratification (with its corresponding loss of nuance). Not only is the world disappearing. We are too. Seduced by a mirage of images that are a parody of the theophany, we can no longer locate ourselves. We have lost own Still-point, our Centre. How, by grasping for images that draw us in yet disperse, that feed us yet never satisfy, can we ever be still? To state the obvious, virtual reality is not reality; it is a flight from the Centre. It offers no true basis for equilibrium, no true basis for community. While claiming to be 'connected', we find ourselves lacking any true 'connection'—increasingly solitary and restless. Like gods before the mesmerizing screen, we have, in a Faustian bargain, bartered away our own soul for the illusory world that the screen offers, exchanging the humility of grace for the hubris of power, community for 'networking', and, with not too great an overstatement, God for Google. Yet, "what shall it profit us if we gain the whole world and lose our own soul?"

What scope is there for wonder in a virtual world that would deny the mystery of transcendence, or for empathy in a disconnected world that would confine us to our screens and an ersatz community, or for true freedom in a digital medium that would tempt us away from life and engagement through escape into fantasy and image—into the relativism of solipsistic 'selfies' and the reductivism of 'twittered soundbites'? There is a potential here for mass delusion, akin to Nero fiddling while Rome burned, as though we were capable of being transfixed and lulled by

the hypnotic and anodyne screen, while the world around us goes up in flames.

Yet this is not a complaint about the Internet. Rather it is a cautionary note about the potential for human indiscipline and the lack of spiritual awareness, particularly in the parlous conditions of our times. The Internet itself is a tool that continues to be, and has the potential to be, of great service to humanity. But to what end? And how? Its virtuality cannot be a substitute for reality, either of the Spirit or the theophany that it manifests, any more than online connections, while offering us the possibility of connectivity, can be a substitute for real community. The Internet is not a 'Real Presence' in any metaphysical sense, just as the soul is no mere 'avatar' but rather is an aspect of the Spirit.

There is a particular need for reticence in the digital age because of the Internet's potential to enchant the soul, to lure it into its virtual vortices, away from the Spirit like the serpent in the Garden. The ubiquity of digital technology has opened up many possibilities to humanity, and while these are capable of being placed in service for the benefit of creation, it is also wise to be wary—to be aware that the powers of technology will inevitably tend to corrupt and corrode the undisciplined soul, especially in an age that has pitted the 'Spirit of the Age' against the Spirit itself.