

HAVE WE LOST THE ABILITY TO CONNECT?

By Roché Snyman

Am I connected?

I listen to my voicemail whilst downloading my long list of emails. I've not responded to Facebook messages for ages and one "friend" asks if I have dropped off the planet...

To some degree I have. I've lost two loved ones in the last seven weeks, and my "friends" on Facebook don't even know this. Neither do most of my colleagues, nor neighbours. Technological miracles can instantly connect me to someone on the other side of the globe – **So why do I feel so disconnected?** Although a very large portion of my day is spent on communicating (mostly via technology), it feels as if there is no real connection...

The problem of disconnection

Sociologists have predicted that technological communication tools will eventually result in an alienated society of people who "cocoon" at home, cut off from real contact with others. We see some of this in business. *Virtual* employees work from home and collaborate in *virtual teams* – people from many different locations in the world, never meeting face to face.

Adolescents increasingly communicate through technology (Mxit, email, Facebook, etc). Even teenagers in the same room communicate via Mxit instead of engaging in conversation. One depressed teenager in therapy commented on how this process made her feel like a robot with a serial number – and when your expiry date is on hand, you are merely deleted and sent to the recycle bin (dust to dust...).

Humans crave real connection

Humans were made to love others and be loved in return. Research in fact shows that babies who do

not have secure attachments to responsive, loving, emotionally nurturing caregivers, have been found to be susceptible to a non-organic condition called "failure to thrive" – meaning that their growth is impaired. Severely isolated babies can display such a drastic reduction in growth rate that they develop *deprivation dwarfism*, which sometimes results in premature death. As they grow, children need constant time, engagement and connection to develop into healthy individuals.

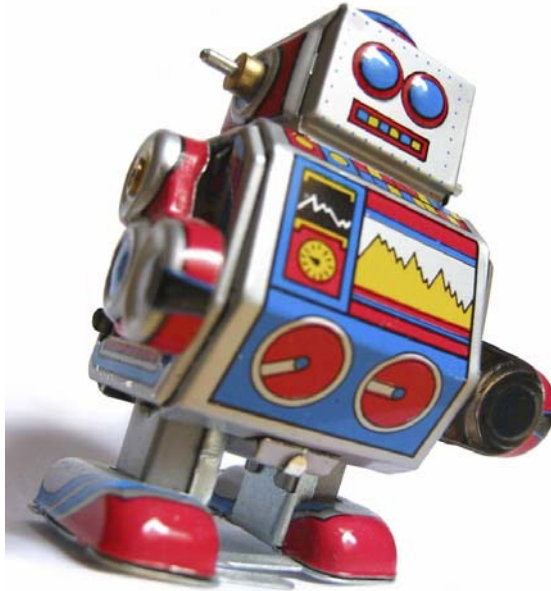
Marriage partners also need time to engage and connect with each other in order for real intimacy to develop. Marriages fail mostly as a result of a breakdown of real communication and connection. Couples lose the initial intimacy because their communication becomes superficial and impersonal. I have witnessed examples of this in my own practice where some couples use email or sms to ask for a divorce or communicate some major life decision.

How do I connect?

So what are we to do to ensure connection and communication that is significant, meaningful and life-affirming instead of dismissive? It starts by valuing people as humans again, instead of treating them as mere extensions at the end of a signal. Thinking of others as warm beings with skin on!

There are three prerequisites to connection. If one of them is missing, the relationship becomes disconnected:

- 1) **Empathy:** the ability to communicate one's understanding of another's experience and feelings.
- 2) **Unconditional acceptance:** Not judging another but accepting and respecting them.



3) **Authenticity:** Being real, honest and transparent

Jesus was a connector!

Jesus told us to love other people as much as we love ourselves (Mat 19:19). Thus connection starts with a decision to seek another's well being before thinking of one's own needs. In Jesus we witnessed the ultimate example of empathy, unconditional acceptance, respect for others, and honest transparency.

He did not play games, but was open and assertive in his communication with others. He also did not condemn people. Instead He dined with and spoke to the shady people of the world – accepting them as humans with so much value, that he was willing to die for them . In Luke 7:36-50 we see an example of His non-judgemental

attitude when He let a sinful woman anoint His feet with perfume at a high society dinner!

He also had great empathy for others. He could have done many of his miracles from afar, by just speaking the word. Instead he would turn around to the person in need, touch the lepers and put his hands on the eyes of the blind. In Luke 9:10-17 we see that He was so tired that He wanted to withdraw for some time to recharge, but the crowds followed Him anyway. Jesus welcomed the crowd and shifted his focus from self to the needs of the crowd. He had compassion and empathy for them.

Picture Jesus living with us today... Would he have done miracles via Facebook? Would he have talked on his cell phone all day instead of making eye contact and listening to others...engaging, connecting?

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