

Social Distancing and Relational Proximity

This is a note I wrote this morning (3/13/20 to our former Surgeon General (and Public Narrative student) Vivek Murthy

Hi Vivek,

I hope you're well in this time of testing...or not enough of it.

I've been thinking a lot about the fact in times of danger our instinct is to come together, not move apart. We gather with family, in churches, mosques, temples, in places of refuge and support. But in response to this threat we are told to move apart, isolate from one another, see the other as a source of fear not comfort. Isolation itself can amplify fear rather than reduce it. And in a culture as transitional and fragmented as our own is already....this could make us even more vulnerable to rumor via social media.

So, what do we do?

Colleges, universities, and other institutions have begun making a radical shift to communication online via Zoom and other platforms. If we learn to make use of this capacity it can help. I currently teach a distance learning class in organizing of some 150 students from 31 countries. And we have learned the possibilities for building online community are far greater than most would imagine. The capacity to see one another's faces simultaneously enables us to share profound emotional experience and solidarity. Facial expression evolved as a fundamental human means of communication emotion - from fear to hope, love to hate, support to opposition.

So, a few weeks ago a student who had been participating in our class from her home in Norway came for a visit to the Kennedy School where I teach for a conference. I invited her to attend the same on the ground class I teach here. Afterwards I asked her what she thought. "Well" she said, "I actually find the online class more intimate!" Seeing my surprise, she added, "Here I sit in class seeing mainly the backs of heads. On zoom I see everyone's faces. I see the laughter and I see the tears, and I experience the community of which I am a part."

She was right. She put into words exactly what many of us participating in this class had come to feel.

Of course, this is not without relational intent: we work at building an online community with one on one meetings, small group interaction, and engaging each other in collaborative work.

Although access to online communication is profoundly unequal, those of us who have such access are wise to take advantage of this capacity for coming together to support one another to confront this threat rather than each retreating to his or her own little cave (if one has one). Perhaps this is one instance in which zoom can counter the effect of its evil twin, social media, often used not to bring us into relationship with one another but to hide in an anonymity that turns others into objects rather than people.

Let's take advantage of this opportunity to use this new technology to enhance our humanity rather than replace it. Let's turn a need for social distancing into an opportunity for relational proximity.

Marshall