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IN CHRIST AND FOR CHRIST - TO KNOW CHRIST AND TO MAKE HIM KNOWN

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THE SOCIAL BRAIN

Many have lauded the Internet as a powerful technology for social networking. It opens doors for communication that were previously shut either by time or geography. Certainly email provides a convenient form of connecting with people. At a time when you can sit down to concentrate, you open your email server and read your correspondence. If you have time you click the "Reply" button and share your thoughts. It's as simple as that. The recipient does not need to be present at her computer. You have time to carefully select your words and even erase words you realize you should not have used. Relationships should be thriving, then.

Some neuroscientists are challenging the party line on Internet sociability. Brain imaging technology has notably accelerated the study of the brain and its innumerable activities. The Center for Social Brain Sciences has focused its attention on one activity labeled the "social brain," the brain circuitry that manages social relationships. Dartmouth College funds this department devoted to "the study of the social, cognitive and neuroscientific basis of the social brain." This multidisciplinary research employs scholars in fields such as social psychology, developmental psychology, cognitive neuroscience, affective neuroscience and education. (www.dartmouth.edu/~sbs/index.htm)

Psychologist and science journalist, Daniel Goleman, authored the book, *Social Intelligence*, which explains much of the emerging information from this new research. Goleman writes, "Neuroscience has discovered that our brain's very design makes it sociable, inexorably drawn into an intimate brain-to-brain linkup whenever we engage with another person. That neural bridge lets us affect the brain—and so the body—of everyone we interact with, just as they do us."

Goleman points out, however, that this part of the brain operates only in the presence of another person. It remains inactive while other portions of the brain process information received in a disembodied communiqué, such as a letter or email. In an interview with *USA Today* he comments, "The social brain doesn't just take in what the other person is doing. It tells us what to do next to keep things operating on track. If we're upset or agitated and we're with the person, we might say something artfully because our social brain is telling us how to do it. But without it online, it lets us do whatever we want – and sometimes with unfortunate consequences."

Social relations have fallen prey to what Goleman terms "techno creep," the insidious influence that digital technology has on human life. He remarks, "We need to be vigilant about the ways in which we're giving up rich and connected time we care about for trivial digital communications that seem urgent but aren't really important." How much time do we spend at the monitor perusing the bulging list of emails and trying to respond to them? How much relational time is forfeited chatting through a keyboard instead of simply using the telephone? (Although communication through a phone connection still falls short of face-to-face interaction, it does incorporate elements of non-verbal communication absent in written communication.)

Goleman warns, "The quality of our relationships is under assault in modern life. I think it makes people both uneasy and more interested in learning about it. I think there are technological and economic forces. Technological forces are all of the electronic gadgets in every household that draw each family member's attention to a solitary world and away from real connection with family members. We need to remind ourselves more often to pay attention to the human moment – to put down the BlackBerry, turn off the cell phone, put aside what you're doing for the moment and pay attention to what's going on with the person you're interacting with. Modern life has gotten in the way. Economic forces also upbraid relationships. People have to work harder and longer to earn the same living that one parent did when I was a kid. Parents are juggling jobs in ways they never had to do before. Kids have more makeshift arrangements in their day. Working 24/7 is a breaching of the boundaries between work and family life." ("Sociability: It's all in your mind," *USA Today*, Monday, Sept. 25, 2006)

This does not argue for technological asceticism. Digital devices can play a helpful role in human experience, but they must be used with discrimination, recognizing their limitations, liabilities, and perils. How often have you relied on a message sent through cyberspace or recorded in a voice mailbox that somehow vanished? How many times has your written message elicited the wrong reaction in its reader due to the absence of valuable components of communication that occur only in embodied person-to-person interaction?

Unquestionably humans are created for connection. The only imperfection of the sixth day of God's new order was that the man was *alone*. God quickly remedied that with the remarkable creature that perfectly corresponded to the man. God wired the human brain for relationships, for social interaction, for interpersonal communication. The Scriptures provide a treasure chest of advice for managing those relationships, all headed by the principle command to love your neighbor as yourself. We just need to carefully use our technology so that it enhances our love for one another rather than interfering with it.

A simple aphorism would suffice: If you can say it, don't write it; seeing them is better than sending it.

Pastor Stan