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# BECOMING GOOD ANCESTORS

HOW WE BALANCE NATURE,  
COMMUNITY, AND TECHNOLOGY

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David Ehrenfeld

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weather reporters there are real humans. Every now and then, I try the weather radio again, hoping that the synthetic announcers have disappeared, but they never have. One thought consoles me, however: I can still go outdoors to see and feel what the weather is like. At least the synthetic announcers don't follow me there. And as for Mr. Kelly, or whomever has succeeded you, I have a friendly warning: In the downsized, lonely, and unnatural world you've helped to synthesize, you may find that nobody gives a damn about you anymore.<sup>1</sup>

Start Reading Here

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### PSEUDOCOMMUNITIES

To begin with, a little anecdote. There is a classroom, an ugly, badly shaped, windowless room in a modern university building designed with students not in mind. In this room there is a small class, my class. We have rearranged tables and chairs in a semicircle around my place to defy the terrible ambience and to allow all twenty-five students to see and hear each other and me. Class is in session; I am talking. Two students sitting together in the front row—a thirty-year-old man with a pager on his belt and a twenty-year-old woman—are speaking to each other and laughing quietly; they see that I am looking at them, and they continue to laugh, not furtively or offensively but openly and engagingly, as if I weren't there. I don't know what they are laughing about. Both of these students will eventually receive an A in the course for their exceptionally fine work.

As I speak to the class, a part of my mind is thinking about these students and wondering why they are laughing. Is there chalk on my face? Is my fly open? Have I repeated myself or unconsciously misused a word or inverted a phrase? Then I remember something Bruce Wilshire wrote, and the paranoia fades. The laughter has nothing to do with me. Bruce, a philosopher who works in a nearby building on campus, described the same attitude in his own classes in his book, *The Moral Collapse of the University*. This passive and casual rudeness, a fairly new phenomenon, has a simple cause, he said. "I sometimes see students looking at me as if they thought I could not see them, as if I were just

somebody on their screen.”<sup>1</sup> When my students were laughing, it didn’t occur to them that I would be bothered—at that moment they were treating me as if I were a talking head on television.

That’s what it is; I am sure of it. The students (at least most of them) and I inhabit different worlds, even when we sit in the same room. In my world, the people I speak with are real; if I offend them they are hurt and angry *with me*, if I give them pleasure they smile *at me*, if I bore them they find an excuse to move away *from me*. We are alive to each other.

The world of my students is far more complex, a hybrid world, a world in transition. For them, some of the old world survives, but it is confusingly intermingled with the new, artificial world of electronic communication. Up to now, this has been mostly one-way communication; the recipients are physically and mentally passive. The faces on the television screen speak and speak—my students have been watching and listening in some cases for five hours a day or more, since the age of one, two, or three. I cannot compete with this. Three hours of class a week for fourteen weeks is no time at all compared with the television they have seen. Their authority figures are two-dimensional and these figures cannot hear. They neither take offense nor do they rebuke; their brief utterances are well suited to the wandering, superficial mentality fostered by the ever-flickering monitor.

The world of television, by inducing passivity and unresponsiveness, has cut many of the human threads and connections that once bound people together into working communities. Lewis Mumford compared life in front of the television screen to life in a space capsule, frightening in its absolute isolation.<sup>2</sup> Passivity and alienation are not communal virtues.

To the extent that television has weakened American communal life, it has weakened communal power, the only effective power to limit consumption, pollution, and the degradation of nature. This would appear to lock us into a hopeless spiral of decline, for television promotes these very evils while weakening the communal ability to resist them.

If this were all the threat that electronic communication has to offer, we might conceivably find ways to cope with the challenge, formidable as it is. We might, for example, take advantage of the fact that television, which has helped to ruin communities, has not eliminated the

desire of most people to be part of a community. A lonely consumer, however passive, is a dissatisfied consumer—unstable, even rebellious. Could we use this instability to fashion a revolt against television? Not any more. Not in the age of e-mail and the Internet.

Perhaps unconsciously, the developers of electronic communication have come up with the perfect counterstrategy to prevent us from using the loneliness of people caught in the television culture to wean them away from the tube and back into the community. This counterstrategy is the creation of *pseudocommunities*, my word for assemblages of electronically linked people. Pseudocommunities have arisen as substitutes for the real ones that are going or gone. Pseudocommunities are making everyone (or nearly everyone) feel good again, are replacing enervating passivity with a semblance of activity, creativity, and choice; but they are keeping the reality of true neighborly, communal responsibility and judgment far away.

Among the most familiar, albeit relatively primitive, systems of electronic, two-way communication, precursors of the pseudocommunity, are the recorded or electronically voice-simulated phone operators. Few people are left in the United States and Canada who have not had their blood pressure raised five or ten points by a patronizing recorded voice saying, “If you want to discuss your bill, press one now; if you want to speak to a nurse to schedule an appointment, press two now; if this is an emergency, press three now; if . . .” Making fun of this is like shooting a sitting duck; I leave it to those who earn a living as nightclub comedians or humor columnists. But a few words will not be amiss. These systems are a threat to communities, paving the way for pseudocommunities, in that they accustom us to dealing with facsimiles of people in our daily lives. Whether people or facsimiles do a better job is irrelevant—there is more to life than maximizing the efficiency of daily transactions (although electronic operators rarely do that—they waste vast amounts of time). Daily transactions between real people are one of the things that can make life worth living.

There is usually nothing that one can do about recorded and simulated voices except hang up, which is not always practical. The ruse of pretending that I don’t have a touch-tone phone has been nullified by the demand that I speak the number of my response to the electronic voice decoder. Only in the case of the artificial information operator

at 411 is there any remaining possibility of satisfaction. When the bright, phony voice says, "What city please?" I answer "wuszcz wuszcz wuszcz" in a low monotone. This baffles the computer and a real operator picks up. How the phone company will deal with this in the future I don't know, but they will find a way. Perhaps a sublethal zap of electricity through the receiver's earpiece will modify my Luddite behavior.

Lately, when the wonders of the age of information and communication have got me down, I have revived my spirits by rereading three exceptional books, Jane Austen's *Emma* and Elizabeth Gaskell's *Wives and Daughters* and *North and South*.<sup>3</sup> These books take place almost entirely within a few miles of the houses of the central characters, and they describe the incredible subtlety and wealth of interactions, for good and evil, that one experiences in a real community. In the sort of communities described by Austen and Gaskell, the passions and activities of love, hatred, sexuality, compassion, selfishness, and intellectual intercourse, modulated by and expressed through the life of the community, take on a complexity and richness that cannot occur in an electronically facilitated pseudocommunity. In a later chapter, I will give Jane Austen some of the attention she deserves, but here I must get back to pseudocommunities.

It seems that almost every advance of our technology brings more social disintegration. Consider interactive video communication, which is already a part of distance learning and many telephones. To the voice in the receiver has been added the face on the screen, and this changes everything. The feature that kept the conventional, hardwired telephone from destroying communities is the *lack* of visual information that accompanied the voice. The disembodied voice was a constant reminder of what the telephone really brings about: communication between people who are actually, demonstrably, perhaps distressingly distant from one another. Like a letter, a phone call was received in private from someone who was elsewhere. Add a picture, and the privacy and sense of distance are disturbed, replaced by an illusion of proximity, a mockery of context. This is another step on the road to pseudocommunity.

But the danger to communities of interactive video is trivial compared with that of e-mail and the Internet. Here I fly in the face of conventional opinion; this technology is supposed to be a liberating force in society, and in some ways it is. Using electronic communications, one can send a message to any person in the world who is in the network, or direct it

to large groups of people simultaneously. It is much harder now for repressive governments or powerful interests to hide news that runs counter to their interests. What better way to promote the free democratic exchange of ideas, to create a "global community"? But there are several catches.

First, the centralized nodes through which all Internet messages pass will always make them vulnerable to censorship and tampering. And compared with old-fashioned spying, covert electronic manipulations are faster, cheaper, and pose little personal risk for the people carrying them out. The technology of privacy and security of communication is in a perpetual race with the technology of invasion and manipulation of the information transmitted. Like the arms race or the evolutionary battle between plants and the insects that eat them, there are no permanent winners and losers.

Far more significant is that the Internet fosters the sensation of being part of a community of people living in the same region and working, creating, and playing together for the common good. But the sensation is only that, for at the end of the day when you in Vermont and your electronic correspondents in western Texas, Delhi, and Yorkshire go to sleep, your climates will still be different, your time zones will still be different, your landscapes and soils will still be different, your local environmental problems will still be different, your cultures and histories will be different, and, what is most important, your neighbors will still be different; and while you have been creating the global community you will have been neglecting them.

The speed and simplicity of communicating electronically can be alluring and habit-forming. Unlike ordinary letter writing, anything that comes to mind can be conveyed instantly with little bother, and can receive an instantaneous response. Thousands and millions of streams of consciousness are accessible by cable or wireless. But this is not necessarily an advantage; it is often a problem. In a proper, durable relationship, many thoughts, after careful reflection, should be left unsaid. Careful reflection takes time and sometimes privacy, assets that we have stupidly wished away. Equally important, if we hope to make valid judgments about things and people, we must have information from all the senses, information that can never be conveyed fully by words, or even pictures on a monitor. The failure of many electronically formed

love affairs, once the couple finally meet face-to-face, is a case in point. There is no easy, glamorous way to be part of a community. The phrase “global community” is an oxymoron.

Pseudocommunities detract from the real work of community building, which, although deeply gratifying, requires painstaking, persistent efforts and perpetual learning that continue as long as one keeps on breathing.

Communication is good and necessary, but not at the expense of communal integrity, which requires a balancing measure of separation of one community from another, and, at times, of one individual from another. Electronic communications systems lack this balance, this subtle regulation of communal function. In the pseudocommunity of e-mail and the Internet it is becoming harder and harder to maintain the kind of personal boundaries that add strength and diversity to real communities and keep them, in most cases, from flying apart.

Constantly there are new products and systems of electronic communications coming on the market. Reality is being replaced with virtual reality. Where will this end? For it will end in the not-too-far-off future. It will end because the global pseudocommunity is and will increasingly become economically unstable. As energy and material resources rapidly grow scarcer and more expensive, the Internet, which is very resource-consumptive, may not be as readily available as it is now. Moreover, for the great majority of users, electronic communications do not help to create real, durable wealth or benefits. The human and natural resources devoted to these electronic systems are not resulting in a socially acceptable outpouring of *necessary* material goods and services. Instead, production, local economic stability, and communal security are sacrificed to transient efficiencies, destabilizing luxuries, and the quick profits of distant entrepreneurs.

Although they do not create much real wealth, the new communications enable wealth to be shifted rapidly from place to place. Under these circumstances of global free trade, instantaneous global finance, instantaneous global exchange or theft of wealth-producing ideas, and facilitated global exploitation of distant resources, it is becoming difficult for most real communities—and people—to continue the slow accumulation or even maintenance of assets that is a condition of survival. As our real communities and nations become more impoverished,

the accumulated wealth and social order that have supported the information research, the electronic hardware and software, and the enormous energy consumption of the Internet<sup>4</sup> will be beyond our means to provide. At this point, the whole network is likely to fragment and contract.

The new systems of communication will also be rejected for social reasons. In addition to being exploitative and expensive, consumers rather than generators of wealth, pseudocommunities are thin, transient, and above all unsatisfying.<sup>5</sup> Although it is fun to play electronic games simultaneously with hundreds of partners in several dozen countries, this kind of fun does not sustain any but the shallowest of existences. Moreover, the loss of real human contact, combined with the breakdown of defined boundaries of self and community, will not be tolerated by most of us forever. Already, research is indicating that those who spend the most time on the Internet and in e-communication are among the loneliest people in our society.<sup>6</sup> Pseudocommunities are seductive, but at some point, most of us will rediscover that face-to-face friends and coworkers are superior to virtual ones.

In an article in the *New York Times* about campus e-mail, reporter Trip Gabriel wrote that on many campuses, electronic communication is preventing the development of meaningful, communal relationships.

Dormitory lounges are being carved up for clusters of computers, student unions are declining as gathering places, and computer-wired dorm rooms are becoming, in some cases, high-tech caves. . . . James Banning, an environmental psychologist at Colorado State University who surveyed some 100 university housing officers last year, remarked: "Universities are saying: 'Oh, my God, they're in their rooms. How can we ever build a sense of community . . . if they don't come out?'"<sup>7</sup>

In one extreme case, a student described by Gabriel communicated with his roommates by e-mail even though they were sitting a few feet apart in the same room. But another student, who had become dissatisfied with electronic socializing, said, "It's easier to just meet someone. You learn how much of a difference it makes to see someone in person and actually talk to them."



Electronic forms of communications are still relatively new and exciting. Indeed, for some who are infirm and handicapped, electronic communication can provide a life-saving source of human contact; and for anyone the Internet, if used judiciously, is a wonderful and quick source of information. We should not, however, confound the value of the Internet for providing information with its value as a substitute for community.

I remember a photograph of a baby monkey in a psychological experiment: it was being raised in isolation with a surrogate "mother" made of wire covered with terry cloth.<sup>3</sup> The monkey was clinging to the device, but it looked profoundly sad and anxious. For most of us, in the end, as the dust gathers and the glamor fades, our pseudocommunities of silicon and plastic and liquid crystal will prove no more comforting and no more nurturing than a surrogate mother of wire and terry cloth.

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## OBSOLESCENCE

At the end of the Cretaceous period, the last dinosaurs disappeared from the earth, setting off an evolutionary jubilee among the Milquetoast-like mammals that survived them, and preparing the ground for what was to become, sixty-five million years later, a permanent source of gainful occupation for scientists whose job it is to wonder why the dinosaurs died out. Scores of reasons have been given for this remarkable concatenation of extinctions. Global climate and sea level were changed by a city-sized asteroid striking the earth near what is now the Yucatán, or by a massive set of volcanic eruptions, or by the solar system passing through the core of a giant molecular cloud, perhaps colliding with a supercomet loosened from the Oort cluster, which orbits the Sun beyond Pluto. Theories of catastrophic extinction abound. Some of the most daring even conjure up the specter of an unseen companion star to our Sun, named Nemesis, whose eccentric orbit brings a wave of potentially deadly comet showers--and extinctions--every twenty-six million years. But there are also paleontologists who argue that the dinosaurs went away gradually, not suddenly, over a period of

## The Uses and Risks of Adaptation

1. Archie Carr, *Ulendo: Travels of a Naturalist In and Out of Africa* (New York: Knopf, 1964), xi-xii.
2. George Orwell, *The Road to Wigan Pier* (New York: Harcourt, [1937]1972), 207.
3. Edward R. Tufte, *The Cognitive Style of PowerPoint* (Cheshire, CT: Graphics Press, 2003), 3, 4. Tufte is best known for his book *The Visual Display of Quantitative Information* (Cheshire, CT: Graphics Press, 1983), a landmark exposition on how to present graphs, charts, maps, and tables effectively, without losing important information.
4. Clive Thompson, "PowerPoint Makes You Dumb," *New York Times Magazine*, December 14, 2003, 88.
5. David Leonhardt, "Technology Eases the Ride to Higher Tolls," *New York Times*, July 4, 2007, C1, c4.

### When Machines Replace People

1. In Karel Capek's play *R.U.R.: (Rossum's Universal Robots): A Fantasy Melodrama* (trans. Paul Selver [Garden City, NY: Doubleday, Page, 1923]), Capek, who coined the word *robot*, lamented the folly of replacing humans with machines. The ending is happier than what we are likely to experience. For another take on the same theme—the preciousness of the human spirit—see P. D. James's *The Children of Men* (Toronto: Penguin Books, 1992).

### Pseudocommunities

1. Bruce Wilshire, *The Moral Collapse of the University: Professionalism, Purity, and Alienation* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), 9.
2. Lewis Mumford, *The City in History: Its Origins, Its Transformations, and Its Prospects* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1961); see especially pp. 511-513 ("Families in Space") for an explanation of why modern America has proved such fertile soil for pseudocommunities.
3. Jane Austen, *Emma* [1815], vol. 4 of *The Oxford Illustrated Jane Austen*, 3rd ed., ed. R. W. Chapman and M. Lascelles (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988) (also see the citations for the chapter titled "Jane Austen and the World of the Community"); Elizabeth Gaskell, *North and South* (London:

Penguin Books, [1854-55], 1970); *Wives and Daughters* (London: Penguin Books, [1864-66] 1986). Elizabeth Gaskell, like Jane Austen who preceded her, had an exceptional ability to describe the society and environment around her. Both of these books record changes in traditional community life; the first because of the new power of industrial development, and the second because of the growing importance of science.

4. Peter W. Huber and Mark Mills, "Dig More Coal—The PCs Are Coming," *Forbes* (31 May 1999), 70-72. Many people think of the Internet and e-mail as free, but as the authors point out, it takes "about 1 pound of coal to create, package, store and move 2 megabytes of data. The digital age, it turns out, is very energy-intensive" (70).
5. Bill McKibben, *The Age of Missinformation* (New York: Plume, 1993); George W. S. Trow, *Within the Context of No Context* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, [1981] 1997); Clifford Stoll, *High-Tech Heretic* (New York: Anchor Books/Random House, 1999). (The three books cited here are important reading for anyone who thinks that electronic pseudocommunities are the way of the future.)
6. Norman H. Nie and D. S. Hillygus, "The Impact of Internet Use on Sociability: Time-Diary Findings," *IT and Society* 1 (2002): 1-20. The principal finding of this extensive study was: "On average, the more time spent on the Internet at home the less time spent with friends, family and on social activities; in contrast, Internet use at work has little effect on sociability" (u). These authors conclude that the Internet, when used at home, displaces social contact. A surprising finding. Another example of this many papers on this subject is Eric J. Moody, "Internet Use and Its Relationship to Loneliness," *CyberPsychology and Behavior* 4 (2001): 393-401. But for a more cautious view, see Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000). For Putnam, who also cites extensive research, television is more of a villain than the Internet. He states, "It is precisely those Americans most marked by . . . dependence on televised entertainment who were most likely to have dropped out of civic and social life—who spent less time with friends, were less involved in community organizations, and were less likely to participate in public affairs." He qualifies his assessment somewhat by noting that "we cannot be entirely certain that [heavy users of television and other electronic entertainment] would be more sociable in the absence of television" (246).
7. Trip Gabriel, "Computers Help Unite Campuses But Also Drive Some Students Apart," *New York Times*, Nov. 11, 1996.
8. H. F. Harlow and R. R. Zimmerman, "Effectual Responses in the Infant Monkey," *Science* 130 (1959): 421-432.