

Fuller Theological Seminary / School of Theology

The Effect of Time-Pressure and Computers on Relationships.

ET518 Robert Banks: *Theology and Ethics of Everyday Life*

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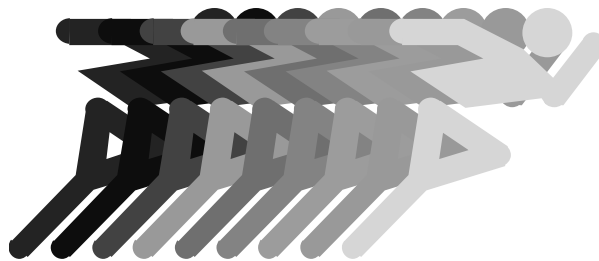


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1. Introduction

The longing for intimate Relationships seems to be very strong in our Western societies today. Only a few are satisfied with their relationships to others. Everybody desires to be in a tight knit group and wants to experience fellowship and a accomplishment together with others.

Even in the family - the most intimate unit in society - people, especially young people - lack deep relationships. Analysis of Gang problems have revealed that a Gang is something like a family to the members. A Gang has a very strong moral code and a deep commitment of the members to each other. This is not experienced in families anymore as in the past.

Another challenge is the influence of computerization on our very beings. The computer allows us to almost totally isolate ourselves from others. We are able to create a dream world separate from reality. Computers shape our way to interact to be strictly adherent to rules. What happens to human compassion, understanding and being able to communicate with other people?

Computers are more and more predominating our daily work. How do we cope with them?

Computers are fascinating especially to male human beings. Does this fascinating sometimes blur our vision for the influence on our lives through the development in society?

I am a computer-specialist and earned a masters degree in this field. At times I was addicted to my computer. It still is a struggle for me to put the computer in the right spot of my life. I was one of the first computer-kids in my country and the computer has definitely left and imprint on my life. That what follows here concerns me personally. The paper has helped me to get a clearer view of computers and their influence not only on our lives but on my life.

2. My Personal Encounter with Relationships in our Society

My first years as a kid were wonderful. I had lots of attention by my parents and often accompanied my father on business trips. But when I was around 6 to 8 years old the situation began to change. My father worked day and night and was not available to me anymore. I felt insecure and therefore was more focused on my relationship with my mother. But when I reached the teens, I felt more and more that she could not understand me anymore. She could not help me to relate to other male peers with which I had a lot of difficulties. I finally joined a couple of other guys and hung around the neighborhood. Doing all kinds of mischief forged our relationships together and we felt that we were united. I finally felt threatened by this kind of community which pressed me to do things to get more recognition and acceptance from the others.

When I had to attend a school in a different part of my home town relationships mellowed down and I was left with almost no friends anymore. I began to read a lot of books and began to replace real relationships with others by fantasy. Fortunately hero-comics (Marvel-Comics, Superman and so on) were not so widely available as nowadays, so I got stuck with classic works, which were also very educational and taught me an interest for the world. I was mainly interested in the functional aspect of it. How do the things on earth work. Which rules do they obey. This main interest resulted in my first career as a software developer.

With 16 years I won a scientific contest in computer science and was involved in the software business shortly afterwards. With a PC I had something that would utterly obey my commands. An item that I knew better than anybody else. I could amaze people with what I could do with them. I could impress people and earn money with it, but real relationships were missing. My parents got divorced when I was 13 years old and my mother developed in a strange way after that.

Without real relationships I felt that something was lacking, life was a pain and not worth living. I did not know what I was looking for. I tried many different things like Transcendental Meditation and so on. But deep relationships were not to be found there. When I finally came into contact with Christians the major attraction to me was the relationships they had among themselves. It was a wonder to me how beautifully they interacted with each other. Through that I became a Christian too.

Sadly the main focus of my church was on "making a decision for Jesus". At first this was a very strange thing to me, especially when I could not find such a thing in the Bible. I found out that the group I knew in that church was special in their orientation towards fellowships. The main focus of the rest was to have people make that decision for Jesus. This caused some kind of distance between "our" group and the church.

After some years the youth group in the church fell apart because people got married, started to work in other parts of Germany and so on. Developing relationships to other part of our congregation was very difficult for the remaining ones. We were a bit put off by their demand on evangelistic performance and the resulting impersonal treatment of us. The rest of us has formed a home fellowship group and still cultivates the old style from our youth-group.

Experience in California

Another encounter with relationships began when me moved to California in 1991 to begin studies at Fuller Seminary. Some years before I had been repeatedly in California for vacations and thought that I had made some friends. I had repeatedly visited them and had always been very much welcome.

When we moved here we stayed for the first days with them until we moved into our apartment. We were very astonished afterwards when there was no attempt to contact us and do something together as might have been experienced by friends. Also most of the new "friends" we made here were like that. It was very easy to be called a friend by them, but this did not mean a commitment to each other as it would have meant at home in Germany.

Our initiatives to do something together are always welcome, but there is rarely any readiness to be more involved with each other. Mostly this is excused by "Oh we did not have time to call you or do something with you".

This is very frustrating for us, but we have not yet found a way to develop the desired close relationships. Perhaps it need some time to develop.

We have an unfair advantage against many Californians. We do not have to work and actually cannot since we are here on a student visa. All that we do is study so we have lots of time to develop relationships.

I have often felt that people here build up relationships as salesmen do. They want something from you therefore they try to establish a good relationship as soon as possible to get the job done. If the purpose of the relationship is fulfilled then there is no interest any more in the relationship. This is a mechanical viewpoint of relationships which is also propagated by common American literature on how to be a successful person.¹

Computers

Since my profession before I came to Fuller was a Software-Developer I had long contact with computers. At first it was another dream-world for me. A dream-world were I was the absolute master, which I was not in reality. It was something I was successful at and what earned me the respect of others. Since I did work long hours with the computer this also had an effect on my way of viewing problems. I became impatient when people did not understand or did not react in a sensible way. I still have this trouble from time to time especially when I am under stress. Also I noticed that I am very rationalistic. I am able to withdraw totally into a rationalistic world to isolate myself from any feelings which I find threatening. This has often helped me in the past as my youth was not without complications. I find it often difficult to experience feelings as other people do. I am too much on my guard.

¹See Dale Carnegie "*Wie man Freunde gewinnt: Die Kunst beliebt und einflußreich zu werden*" Scherz Verlag: Bern, 1989 Translation from the American Edition "*How to win friends and influence people*".

3. Analysis of the Relationships in our Society

3.1. The Tendency to Task-based Relationships

As I have experience the modern western world, relationships are mostly associated with work and performing special tasks. Therefore work is of vital importance to a member of our society. Being "out of work" means being without an identity and therefore undermines the self-esteem and cuts one off from society. That is the importance of work in our society. We believe in work!²

And although we strive to rationalize and try to reduce work, when we succeed we take on more duties so that "Work always expands to fill the time available"³.

This is connected to the materialistic view of our society. Working more effectively means earning more money, which in turn means the ability to possess more, to have more power over things or other persons.⁴

Relationships are secondary in this respect and are often used (The Business World) to gain access to power.⁵

3.2. Relationships under Time-Pressure

Maintaining deep relationships demands a lot of time and many people are not willing to "sacrifice" time, which can be used for earning money, for this purpose. This is evidence of our basic convictions in this society. The Mammon reigns⁶.

Until short before the industrial revolution the famous puritans had a "disregard for profit, pleasure and advancement"⁷. This enabled them to spend time on effective fellowship, be there for each other and stay in touch with what was going on in people around them⁸.

Our many casual relations in our "modern" society are in a stark contrast to the past were one could be satisfied with a deep relationship to just a few friends.⁹

The quest for material possessions is common today. People are judged according to what they own. Material Possessions cost money. Time is Money. If we need all the time for Money there will be none left for relationships.

3.3. Computer-Relations

The more and more widespread use of computers in everyday-life has a deep influence on our lives.

It has been reported that programmers after a long time of working with computers began to relate to others in the same way than they did to their computer¹⁰. They begin to loose relational skills especially the ability to synchronize with group behavior or other

²O'Malley p. VIII

³O'Malley p. VIII

⁴Ellul p.258

⁵See Footnote 1

⁶Smith p.20

⁷O'Malley p.29

⁸Rifkin p.21

⁹Shi p.82

¹⁰Rifkin p.19

individuals' behavior. Surveys have shown a gradual destruction of human-human contacts.

Work with computers leads to a higher stress level. Surveys done on clerical workers have shown an increased stress level up to the level for air-traffic-controllers¹¹.

"Interfacing" with that machine teaches us certain relational-skills. We learn to base our life on "facts", which are verifiable and repeatable. Interaction with others gets restricted to an exchange of information about certain facts.¹²

Although we do not identify the computer with a human being, as we integrate the computer into our lives we effectively also integrate ourselves into the computer. This in turn affecting our thinking about reality and ultimately our behavior. Our ability to experience and to respond to feelings and to have emotions is reduced. Everything is rationalized and has to be logical.

Computers can also lead to a life in a dream world when one constantly thinks about computer problems. It is common with software-developers or programmers who are in highly concentrated mental work each day to wake up in the night and have some great inspiration to the solution of some special computer problem. This shows that these people are constantly occupied with the computer, and have trouble taking their minds away from it even when they are asleep!¹³

3.4. Human = Machine?

Scientists often regard humans as machines. Medical Sciences treat the human body as a machine which is to be analyzed and to be fixed through mechanical procedures¹⁴.

Computer Scientists are attempting to simulate the brain with "neural networks". People in our society most often think of the brain of a human as a kind of sophisticated computer which can be reprogrammed if faulty.¹⁵

3.5. Ultimately Customized Worlds

The advances in Technology make it possible to live in a fantasy world of our choice¹⁶ beginning with Television and ending with advanced Computer-Games and Electronic Bulletin Boards. There is no need anymore to directly interact with others. Even if it would be necessary, we can do it mediated through computer-networks the most convenient way. Why bother with inefficient human communication when everything can be mediated with computers? There is no conflict any more, just a set of rules that are programmed to my liking. Martin Dawley writes "The Western Society is in danger of withdrawal into a fantasy laden Nirwana"¹⁷.

¹¹Rifkin p.22

¹²Emerson and Forbes p.82- give a lot of examples of people suffering from relational disorders caused by heavy computer interaction.

¹³Example in Emerson and Forbes p.83

¹⁴Rifkin p.200-

¹⁵Emerson and Forbes Chapter 7 "*Regaining our Souls*"

¹⁶Rifkin p.18

¹⁷Dawley p.8

The consumer society reduces the need for dependent social interaction by providing machines to do the common daily tasks without anybody else¹⁸. With this restricted social interaction - seems it all began with the introduction of Television - we are more and more able to be manipulated by media. Reality is not experienced any more, it is fed through the appropriate channels to us. The power of TV is well known to us, all politicians have to use it to get elected and it is deliberately chosen by different interest groups to bring their concerns to the peoples "attention".

The Media has the power to redefine reality. Most interesting were the *Judge Thomas Hearings* in the Fall of 1991. A majority of the population was afterwards convinced that Judge Thomas did nothing wrong. Through constant repetition in the Press a connection has been made between Judge Thomas and sexual harassment, so that now a majority of people believe that Judge Thomas was guilty¹⁹.

Thus the Media has the power to change the basis of truth. There is no absolute truth anymore. Truth is relative and can be worked on.

Nowhere is the Reality of living in a dream-world more evident as in Computer-Games. People lose contact to reality, lose their feeling of time and live totally in this fake world. Will our future be that we all can live in our own customized worlds, isolated from each other?

4. Ethical Reflection

The ultimate question in relationships is what do we value higher? Material possessions or fantasy worlds? In the modern world we are capable of living our own life and setting our personal priorities. If this priority is money we will not have any time for deep relationships because we are constantly busy striving for material possessions. If it is a fantasy world we will be caught up with some kind of World may it be Computer-Games or TV-addiction or whatever our technical gadgets will provide. This also will make it impossible for us to live in the reality and thereby also impossible to have real relationships to others. Having real relationships is only possible when we live in reality.

Of course one can also have relationships in a fantasy world. These relationships have the advantage that they are not that nasty as in the real world and that they can be altered or switched off as desired. Today we are able to construct the world according to our liking. Another question that has to be answered is if rational thinking is really everything. Are not emotions often superior and more effective than rational conclusions? Rifkin argues that "Emotions are decision making programs developed through evolution"²⁰. Are we sure we can do without them?

5. What can be done

The first thing of course is to set our priorities right. Relationships must have priority over material goods or dream-worlds.

¹⁸Dawley p.8

¹⁹See a lot of examples in Rush Limbaugh "*The Way things ought to be*" Pocket Books, New York, 1992 especially Chapter 11 "*The Sage of Anita Hill*" p.114-

²⁰Rifkin p.188

5.1. Committed Community

The Christian community must be a place of committed community again.²¹

Too often relationships within Christian congregations are shallow and people do not really know each other. The mark to the world that we are Christians is our unity²². If we are not really committed to fellowship, then we should ask if we really are a congregation. Or are we a club who meets to perform certain common tasks?

Church members do need to move intentionally closer to each other - if possible - to interact daily. Some Churches have set up cooperatively owned multi-family houses. They are purchasing cars, boats, and tools together. Of course this also leads to the necessity of working together, which is very important to get to know each other better.²³

Living in a committed community also helps to have a balance to our computer culture. Daily interaction with others should keep us sufficiently out of prevalent computer thinking.

5.2. Accountability

Accountability in personal relationships is very unnatural in the western individualistic societies. Who dares to be honest to somebody else when something is going wrong? Who dares to confront? Do we feel responsible for the well-being of each other? Without these elements real community is impossible. Just being nice and positive does not build a community. Suffering through difficulties together does it and this must include being real and honest and daring to confront others.²⁴

Accountability also works against the individualistic tendencies of our society and makes us realize that we live in a community.

5.3. REAL Evangelism

What do we want when we evangelize? A hand that is raised to signify a decision for Jesus? Another Repeat-After-Me Prayer?²⁵

This seems to be the easy way out to do evangelism. We rarely see any people as a result of this endeavors appearing in our congregations. The real evangelization is through our life-style. Through us being in loving community. A community that the others long for. The most effective witness is through our lifestyle²⁶. That is what made the Roman Empire crumble, that is what builds our churches if we look carefully.

The Future of Evangelism may be to attempting to get people out of their synthetic worlds in which they live into reality. Most important for us is to demonstrate the fact that there is an enjoyable reality. The world will be very skeptical because all communication channels are used to suggest to people ways to be happy that are ultimately not working.

²¹Smith p.20

²²John 13:34+35

²³Smith p.22

²⁴Smith p.28-30

²⁵Smith p.126

²⁶Smith p.129

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