

STEVEN BIONDOLILLO JANUARY 23, 2019

A Challenge to the "Global Village"



One doesn't need to be a social psychologist to register the dizzying and dispiriting array of issues and trends fraying the nation's social fabric. The "Global Village," announced over 50 years ago by Canadian communications and media philosopher Marshall McLuhan (*The Gutenberg Galaxy*, 1962), was McLuhan's moniker for a world characterized by extreme division, violent disagreement, and lethality—the natural result of compressing a species into a small physical space.

Paradoxically and ironically, the source and enabler of McLuhan's "disconnected village" was "connective technology." Now, decades later and as predicted, we find ourselves violently split along multiple lines:

- Identity (including race, gender, ethnicity, religion, geography and economics)
- Politics (from Tea Party Republicans to Bernie Sanders Democrats, and white nationalists to Antifa militants)

- Social movements (e.g., Black Lives Matter vs. All Lives Matter, and #MeToo vs. Pence Rules adopters)
- News and information sources (e.g., CNN vs. Fox News, MSNBC vs. OAN and, lest we forget, the proponents of "facts" vs. "alternative facts")

Yet the single most problematic and pernicious "disconnect" enabled by "connective technology" is not in the public realm. It is, instead, in our private and personal lives. As a result of our varying degrees of addiction to connective devices, we "villagers" are becoming increasingly disconnected from our own brains, relationships and communities.

Helping to lead the way in measuring and understanding the deleterious effects of technology are two social psychologists who might be considered McLuhan heirs—MIT's Sherry Turkle and San Diego State's Jean Twenge. A partial list of their book and article titles is both telling and troubling:

- *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other*, by Turkle (Basic Books, 2011)
- "How We're Becoming Slaves to Technology," (Vox.com, 2018, with Turkle)
- "Have Smartphones Destroyed a Generation?" by Twenge (*The Atlantic*, September 2017), subtitled "More comfortable online than out partying, post-Millennials are safer, physically, than adolescents have ever been. But they're on the brink of a mental-health crisis."
- *iGen: Why Today's Super-Connected Kids are Growing up Less Rebellious, More Tolerant, Less Happy—and Completely Unprepared for Adulthood*, by Twenge (Simon and Schuster, 2018)

As Turkle and Twenge document, our connectedness has produced social conditions in which multiple generations are experiencing unprecedented levels of anxiety, depression, loneliness and, even, suicide rates... in other words, a public health crisis of epic proportions.

When the human body is attacked by a molecular threat, its immune system invisibly begins to mobilize against the problem. Similarly, when the body politic is attacked, solutions to the problem begin to mobilize even before the disease is fully understood and defined. Enter a sensible antidote to our social crisis called [The Jacob Challenge](#).

The Jacob Challenge is a call to gather in small groups for monthly meetings to discuss, not participants' Facebook (and other) Envy, but, life's basics: love and relationships, truth and beauty, adversity and death. The project is about rebuilding the ability to listen, understand, and empathize, and its structure is groups of 10-12 individuals, the majority of whom should be 50+.

Why The Jacob Challenge?

Because our current socio-cultural trajectory is self-defeating, frightening and (as we see almost weekly) deadly. The project's *premise* is that we share the same existential experience—we're born, overcome adversity, experience joy and pain, build and/or join families and communities,

love and hate, and die—and its *challenge* to participants is to listen and converse... not talk past each other, which requires risk, engagement, skill, hard work, and tenacity.

Who is Jacob?

Jacob is the only Old Testament figure represented as having literally wrestled with God. His story is a metaphor for human life and its never-ending practical and spiritual struggles. The Jacob story reminds us that, in time, we all should come to grips with the problematic aspects of our pasts, wrestle with our truths, and commit to positive change.

Why meet in person?

In her book, *Reclaiming Conversation: The Power of Talk in a Digital Age* (Penguin Press, 2015), Sherry Turkle makes an airtight case for the role played by face-to-face communication in the development of empathy. Digital communication is damaging us, Turkle warns. It's time to show up and face each other.

What sets up the best group discussion? Poetry!

As medical doctor and famous 20th century poet William Carlos Williams said, "It's difficult to get the news from poems, yet men die miserably every day for lack of what is found there." Also, poems are short (which fits the "hieroglyphic" zeitgeist), pack maximum meaning into the fewest words, and eschew jargon, slogans and newspeak, as well as hyperbole, tropes and cliché.

What's the point?

Get as many people as possible into an adult discussion group (is there anyone who wouldn't benefit from this?), in the hope of healing the body politic on a molecular level, or, revisiting this article's opening metaphor, in the hope of reconditioning the individual fibers of the nation's social fabric.

[The Jacob Challenge](#) is just one of hundreds of growing grassroots responses to our pernicious "Global Village." Please consider it and (making good use of your Smartphone) pass it along!

Steven H. Biondolillo is the president of Biondolillo Associates and the author of Macaroni and Cheese Manifesto. His op-eds have appeared in numerous daily newspapers.