

March 11, 2010

Letter from Lost Prairie

Virtual life

A couple of years ago I read a bizarre story in the August 14, 2008 edition of the London Review of Books. It has stuck with me. Jonathan Raban, an Englishman living and writing for some years now in the United States, wrote about the “Virtual life of Neil Entwistle”. Neil Entwistle emerged as a public figure in January 2006. He was at that time a 27 year old Englishman from York, educated at York University where he earned a degree in electronic engineering and met a young American woman, Rachel, whom he married and with whom he eventually moved to the States, attempting to earn a living as a digital entrepreneur. The couple had a baby and lived in the US for barely 4 months, posting frequent internet updates of the happy family, until Neil shot his wife and baby at point blank range with a Colt .22 revolver which he borrowed from his father-in-law’s collection (driving 45 minutes to collect the weapon and then to return it again before and after the shooting). Neil then boarded a plane for England and returned home where he was arrested. In his pockets were a one-page eulogy to Rachel, a draft of a scripted phone call to the editors of London tabloids regarding his side of the story and an advertisement for the services of prostitutes and escort agencies.

Raban argues that there is no persuasive evidence for a motive in this murder and suggests strongly that close examination of Neil’s on line history and the contents of his pocket at the time of his arrest “were like his on-line life, as he switched from screen persona to screen persona, switching identities and avatars on his internet journeys.” In the end Raban suggests that Entwistle lived his life in virtual space and that, although outwardly conforming and conventional, he “conspicuously lacked an authentic self.”

What does this strange and extreme story have to teach us about the inner lives of those young people who are referred to us for help around their addiction to computers, computer games and who treat their lives on line with more seriousness than their flesh and blood relationships? We are all familiar with the parental lament. A son, or daughter, has retreated into the on-line world, has begun to inhabit the twilight zone of the screen, has turned their nights into days and become hooked on the computer as a source

of emotional sustenance rather than the everyday world. We are also aware of how cruel others can often be to needy young people. The internet has been a source of comfort for some shy and awkward teenagers but at the same time it has deprived them of the necessity of going outside of their comfort zone to make real relationships. Many of our students have found comfort in this ether zone. They have become hypertrophied creatures of the night, masters of intricate war games and ersatz relationships. My Space does not present the person as they really are but in the various guises in which they choose to present themselves. Neil Entwistle lost himself in these guises. He did not know who he was, had little sense of reality in his life and, probably wanted to escape it when it failed to measure up to his fantasies of what it should be. He appears to have committed a murder without the slightest idea of what the obvious consequence was likely to be. Just as, for example, one gets rid of an evil avatar in a game. Some of our teenagers, like younger children, are also at risk of mistaking pretend for reality.

Modern technology has confused this normal developmental step by providing even very young children with a virtual existence that is distinctly separate from those of the adults in their lives. Cell phones have morphed into mini hand-held computers, social networking devices, cameras and tiny movie-screens. Some teenagers use them to stay connected with the adults and other important relationships in their lives; others to go underground and elude the watchful eyes of adults. Some get lost in the underworld of pretend. The outward trappings of connectivity are sometimes the opposite of what they appear to be. They can readily aid and abet the secret lives of teenagers. When adults try to regain control of their children's technological tools, they can provoke rage and sometimes violence.

One of our students recently told me that he was dismayed to think that his whole generation was awash in a world of drugs, pornography and on-line media and that underneath all this they were struggling with enormous anxiety about how to find themselves in this hall of mirrors. He said that for every student whose parents were able to send them to a therapeutic school to find themselves there were, of course, thousands who did not and could not go and that he felt that this "privilege" put a lot of responsibility for the future of a generation on the shoulders of those who had the opportunity to free themselves from this dangerous world.

I have to resist my own inclination to be a latter day Luddite. My daughters helped me to sign up for Facebook on my 60th birthday. Like

many in my generation I was a bit non-plussed about how, or whether, I was going to use this new piece of technology. I wasn't entirely sure that I saw the point. After all I was already equipped with an address book and email which comfortably divided various groups of people in my life. Once up and running I contacted a few people who were likely to be sympathetic about my foray into this new medium and began to worry about how much to reveal and to whom. After all we all know that all friends are not, in fact, equal. As it turned out I needn't have worried. Although I now have a sizeable group of "friends" many of these simply constitute people I have met (several MA alumni) and act as a certain kind of archive. Unlike my daughters who spend a good deal of time maintaining their Facebook pages and keeping in touch with this method I find that it has only limited usefulness for me although I have had a few pleasant encounters with "lost" friends via this route. I am at this late date in my life unlikely to use Facebook as a primary mode of communication.

Many adults are addicted to the tools of this technological age. Some are almost as hard to wean from their Blackberries as their children are from computers. One father told me about visiting an old friend in a European city after a 5 year absence and being confronted by him over his surreptitious use of his Blackberry during dinner. He was embarrassed and made the decision never to turn it on during dinner again. Another father sent me a copy of a letter than he had received from the Dean of his distinguished law school. This Dean expressed his concern over students who paid more attention to their on-line lives in the classroom than to the lectures and justified his decision to disable wireless connections in the classrooms in the interest of maintaining a competitive law school environment. None of us is immune to the siren call of this world. As adults we expect to be better equipped to deal with these temptations and to check them when they begin to interfere with our day to day relationships.

Our children lack this ability. In these young lives technology is now recognized as psyche-changing and identity shaping. Young people exist in a world of on-line chatter and it is hard for them to find the quiet space to discover who they are and what they think. The bombardment of media and social networking has diminished the uniqueness of the individual voice. We need to monitor those who are not able to monitor themselves and to protect them until they are better able to distinguish fantasy from reality and to develop that "authentic sense of self" to which Raban refers, and the skills to handle real relationships. When they have done so technology will resume its proper place as a tool in their lives, rather than a source of life itself.

We cannot run a school like Montana Academy without access to computers and email, but we are also in a position to control the amount of outside information that our students receive and to turn down the volume of chatter in their lives. We watch with pleasure as they focus on getting to know themselves better and to developing close relationships with each other. And we look forward to meeting with our parents face to face for three days at our upcoming parent workshop and to getting to know you better also.

Warm regards,

Rosemary McKinnon