

I Think I May Be Muted

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I am wondering what it is that I find so difficult about Zoom meetings with a group of friends. I don't have the same difficulty with work meetings. I think friendship is still, for me, about relaxing, sharing, letting go, opening up. And with Zoom, (or Teams or other platforms), I am still on alert. I am fixed.. caught in the visual and the contradiction of visuals without a corresponding physical presence. My brain is struggling to compute having moved from three dimensions to two dimensions.

I am beginning to think it is more profound, more primitive than the obvious (poor internet connections, gallery view vs speaker view, getting locked out, etc). I think it is something deep in the animal of my body, in the intuition of connection.

My eyes are fixed to the screen. To look away is to look to a space where they, my friends, are not. So everything becomes forward focussed, on a tiny screen. My body radar is also forward focussed, and narrowly focussed. I am receiving information through my eyes and ears, my mirror neurons are firing in response to the person, but I am not receiving body-to-body information directly in the room. And my body is confused – it is alert for the information to arrive ... and it doesn't.

My friends don't act coherently with shifts in my environment which brings me whispers of uneasiness. The same is true of some of their responses - because I don't know the external stimulant which prompted them. Even the micro-delays in the technology builds in slivers of mistrust.

Phone conversations are easier. In our biological history we have got used to listening without seeing: as hunters; or speaking after dark; or speaking from opposite sides of bushes, walls or trees. We developed that skill set as hunters, as communicators, as relaters.

And now we're having to understand how to see in two dimensions; how to be both active and passive with humans who present only in two dimensions, and from far away. In films we got used to being passive in two dimensions - that's easy because the film doesn't care what you're looking at; the film doesn't care if you're eating popcorn or asleep. But on Zoom I care about what the others care about; I care that the others care. On Zoom I have a sense of obligation to the group.

My body wants to shift, my body wants to look away, my body wants to look down to listen.

In normal group conversations there is a particular dance – we subtly take it in turns to be the person to whom the conversation is directed. In the real world, as speaker I can only look into the eyes of one person in any one moment, and that person takes up the role of key listener, responds with their eyes, their body. That one person is the focus for a while and in that time the rest of us shift. We listen but maybe we don't look, maybe we connect with ourselves, or look away, relax, withdraw momentarily. And the speaker shifts their attention, and another becomes the key responder. We keep ourselves in a conversational dance in the here and now, dancing in our connections, shifting our focus.

I have not learnt how to dance in and out on Zoom, how not to look rude. I don't know who the speaker is looking at, I don't know if she is looking at me or my neighbour so I'm constantly responding as if I am the focus of the attention, but also not getting the eye-to-eye connection which confirms that connection. Deep down in my unconscious mind, I am confused.

And as if all that were not enough, the camera gives me endless external feedback about... me: whether I am in frame; whether I look grumpy; whether I am further away from the screen than everyone else. So I am

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processing that as well - that new way of seeing myself in the moment as I respond to others. That in itself is radical enough.

And all this in the context of isolation for each of us such as we've never experienced in our lives before and so have more need than ever for natural human contact. And all this at a time when we are trying to find ourselves within new relationships between disruption and complying, between acting as a collective as a nation and finding our own feet as individuals, between change to the whole system and finding new routines and rules; in the light of COVID-19, the ensuing economic depression, Brexit and Climate Crisis....

And so, the practice feels one of playing with Zoom, finding ways to reconnect with my own interiority so that I can be better present in this new dance; broadening and softening my gaze in and out of frame; risking feeling rude in the spirit of engaging better; and finding ways to bring relaxation to my body so that my bodymind can follow. The practice feels one of daring to follow Mary Oliver's line "You only have to let the soft animal of your body love what it loves" and let my animal body explicitly explore this new medium, alongside my socialised self.

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