

Time to Unplug or Surfing with Hermes and the Arts Between the Worlds

Margareta Wärja

Like a piece of music in the shape of a theme and variations, I hear a tune being expressed over and over again among clients, students and colleagues, regardless of their situations. The song is a lament about the great difficulty in finding time to rest, relax and recharge.

We live in a world in which we are constantly exposed to communication, media influences, messages and information. We are online, connected and perpetually available. We download material from across the globe in seconds. We keep our cell phones on vibration mode in order not to miss a call. We sit in front of big TV screens and zap between realities; news from the local and larger world, comic shows, wild-life documentaries, cartoons, and intense psychological dramas. We make life-changing decisions as we move about in the day—on the bus, in the car, at the airport. Cyberspace provides a universe in which we talk, chat, fight, date, make love, search information, buy and sell, and receive various services. This infinite web has a life of its own. It has almost become more real than real life. We can invest money in property, build cities, buy art, and mingle at parties, all in the virtual reality of cyberspace.

Klara Regina, my daughter, is 13 years old. I watch her from a distance as she is doing home-work at the computer. Currently she is working on a PowerPoint presentation. She scans in photos, cuts and pastes among images, paints, adds music, and writes texts. Suddenly she realizes she needs some additional facts and in the next moment she flies out onto the web looking for the answer, returning with a catch. Now and then there is a funny sound from the machine. A message has arrived from someone on the chat site. Klara pops up a window, answers with a short tap-dancing rhythm and then moves back to doing her home work. She seems totally fine, present, relaxed and moves about in these worlds like a natural dancer. Communicating with friends and performing home work at the same time just evolves organically and has its own creative intelligence.

In ancient Greece, one image of communication was the elegant, speedy, half-god Hermes who had wings on his feet. He served as a messenger, a connector, and a bringer of essential information between the worlds. He was the one who carried stories of both the lives of the living and of the dead. We humans need to communicate, connect and relate in order to develop, grow and function. Without relationship we wither away and ultimately die. The huge worldwide web we call the Internet is a communication marvel. On a grand scale, the web is in service of peace and freedom of speech. But it can also be a potential killer. And like a dark labyrinth it has thorny and blind alleys where one can get totally seduced and lost.

In addition to surfing in this grand virtual world, we try to live our lives with work, relationships, partners, children, education, taking care of our health and keeping a home. We know that always being available creates stress, and stress creates diseases. In my work as an art-based psychotherapist, supervisor, and teacher I listen to stories about severe stress reactions, exhaustion, panic attacks, abuse, inability to carry on work, thoughts of suicide, and psychosomatic illnesses.

We certainly all have individual abilities and limitations that we employ to cope with the stressors of everyday life. The causes and circumstances of problems and crises are complex and unique to each person and situation. Living also involves our ability to attach and connect with others and to learn to cope and create meaning out of our life experiences. How and when we move over the edge and lose our ability to find helpful coping strategies varies with each person's story. When overload has occurred, in order to simplify a bit, I see two main op-

tions that people use to cope: shutting down or speeding up. It is like activating an internal switch which is either turned on or off.

Some individuals are always "on the move." Constantly thinking ahead and planning the next moment. This activity can in itself be enticing and addictive. There is a need to be in control of one's life. This activity seems to feed the self-image and to keep unwanted thoughts and feelings at a distance. When opportunities for free and unplanned time occur, or there is time for proper rest, the person experiences stress and cannot "just be," sinking into the moment and seeing what it might bring. It is as if the bodily functions are in a constant state of alarm.

The other option for reacting is often described as feeling blank, limp, empty, wrung out, and unable to plan anything. There is no sense of direction and no experience of need, no sense of pleasure and satisfaction, and no helpful thoughts or feelings. It is like the compass spinning around and around in circles never stopping to point the way. The person may even be unable to work and carry out simple everyday tasks. Depending upon the severity of the condition, various methods to reduce inputs are employed; sleeping excessively (often without really resting), isolating from the world, self-medicating with alcohol, drugs, sex, or food. The treatment answer from the medical world is typically to prescribe anti-depressant medication, sometimes in combination with short-term psychotherapy.

One evening I invite two of Klara's classmate friends, Nelly and Linnea, for an informal talk about growing up today, the future, music, art and creativity in general. We sit around the dinner table eating Mexican fajitas. It is an

engaging exchange. Nelly sees herself as a feminist and is concerned about the use and abuse of Internet and thinks it makes people feel alone. "I prefer meeting real people and reading real books. And I think I want to have an old fashioned typewriter". She speaks of wanting to become a journalist and work for equality between men and women. An intense exchange of the pros and cons of the web takes place. Linnea aims to be a designer or have a restaurant and says, "I love the web and I love working on my homepage every day and speaking with friends on MSN. I want to express myself and not look like others." Klara, who wants to become a professional singer and musician, says that the web is a fun place to meet and to learn about the world and differences between people. "Just imagine that in a second I can talk to someone in Japan and learn about their way of life and hear the music they like." An engaging topic is the power and importance of music for young people today. All agree that music is necessary for life but that it can be used in negative and stupid ways.

As the Director of the Swedish Institute of Expressive Arts for over 18 years, I have witnessed many changes and new developments in the field. During these two last decades, about 180 students have graduated from the Institute. Comparing the job prospects of 20 years ago with those for recent students and graduates, I see that the use of the arts in health care has moved out from the institutions and hospitals and into organisations, business and community work. The clear tendency in Sweden is a movement away from psychiatry and the medical model toward using the arts in preventive care, maintenance of health, team-building, organisational and personal development.

There is nothing like art to bring a person into the

moment. Engaging in art activities, whether it is creating, experiencing or witnessing, demands attention in the present. Art, governed by the god Eros, guides and helps us balance the qualities of the worlds of Apollo and Dionysus. I see art-based community work as a way to hold and nurture the laments of the current time. By engaging in an art experience, people suffering from overload, exhaustion syndromes, depression and other ailments receive an instant "medicine" and ways to surrender, rest and recharge. Art-based work can become one answer to people longing to unplug. I think that educators in the expressive arts field need to become more conscious of the qualities of art in order to present "now moments." As leaders in this field we must formulate, focus and define the qualities that are unique to the arts in the training of future art-based professionals. My own way to deal with difficulties, crisis and stressors in my life has always been to turn to music. I fall into music and I am held, cleansed and energized. The Estonian composer Arvo Pärt puts this beautifully as he speaks of "music as existing on the border of silence."

At the end of the dinner talk Linnea, Nelly and Klara summarize: "what is important for us growing up today is to believe in ourselves, to express ourselves, and to not worry too much about what the media and others think is right and cool."

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Desert Signs

Elizabeth Gordon McKim

It's the surfaces
I mean to clarify be-
Fore the evening comes

In our own ways we'll
Trickster trouble while we can...
(Till he steals our stuff!)

Later, amigo!
Catch you in the next go-round
When we pause down-wind

Elizabeth Gordon McKim, poet/performer/teacher, is the Poet Laureate of the European Graduate School.