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PSYCHOLOGIST'S WARNING: TECHNOLOGY CAN BE BAD FOR YOU, SOMETIMES

The world today has a lot to thank technology for. You would not be reading this blog and I would probably be getting less work if it had not been for the internet and its corollaries. There is an odd thing that I have seen in my rooms for the third time a few weeks ago. When I saw it the first time, I did not blink as I thought it was an idiosyncrasy of the relationship I was working with at the time. The second time I saw it I smiled inside and thought "Interesting"! The third time I thought, "Hell, there's got to be something behind this". As I usually do in between sessions, I thought deeply about it afterwards and tried to conjure up a hypothesis to explain it.

Here is the thing I saw: A couple shows up and I do what I always do in my first encounters with couples. Listen. I listen to both versions of the relationship experience in order to get an understanding of what is going on. In these three cases I was dealing with couples who were not talking to each other at home. Listening to them, I could picture in my mind a home where there is no life, as we say in Setswana. The couple could be described as almost hating each other's guts. They just cannot stand each other. What was interesting with those couples is that although they could not bring themselves to look each other in the eye and talk, the moment they got to the office they would turn their computers on, go on-line and start sending e-mails or SMSes, sometimes abusive in content, to each other. Do you get it? These are people whose description of their problem is "We don't communicate". By communicate, they mean talk. It is difficult for them to talk to each other verbally, yet they can talk electronically. Does this mean we have "dual" personalities - a real one and a virtual one?

My explanation for this kind of behaviour is that technology has created distance between people, while creating closeness between people and machines. Distance comes with safety - what is far from you cannot harm you, therefore, we have come to feel "safe" when we are in the virtual world where we cannot be "touched" (it works differently when you are in a studio ☺). Come to think of it, we worship machines. Look around you at teenagers (some adults too) today. They walk around with white wires hanging from their ears and looking down on a screen in their hands while their fingers are pushing buttons. You can get a heart attack and die next to them and they will not take notice. Even when they do talk to people around them they

are still looking at gadgets and busy with their fingers. Communication by talking and listening is one of those skills that have been honed by the process of evolution to help our species survive. Survival requires that people collaborate and share, which makes communication essential. In the modern age, it seems, communication is done through electronic devices that obey their users' instructions, thus making it easy for us to have our way and not negotiate. You press a button and the gadget responds. Eeezy ne! (Remember that advertisement on TV those years?). In the pre-tech world people had no choice but to be in the same physical space and talk things out when they needed each other's attention. Sitting, facing each other and talking was a natural human survival skill, whether it was in a cordial or hostile atmosphere. For this reason the human capacity to reason and relate became highly developed in people. I am sure a 15 year-old of 1911 had better conversational skill than a 15 year-old of 2011. It would also be interesting to compare a city teenager with her rural counterpart on conversational and listening skills.

The introduction of high-tech communication devices, while essential for survival in the modern world, have a downside that results in people needing psychologists and anti-depressants. The downside is that people lose touch with each other and what it means to be a human being. For this reason it does not come naturally to people in relationships to sit and talk things out when there are problems. It is much easier for them to reach for their computers and Google their problems (The good thing about Google is that they will find me and give me work ☺). Now on a serious note, I do not think this is a psychologically healthy thing to do. No problem of living gets resolved by searching the internet or bitching by SMS. People still need to talk. Talking is a natural problem-solving skill that evolution has hard-wired us for. That is why we have imagination where animals have instinct. Technology, instead, seems to be turning us into cowards who become brave in the virtual world but meek as lambs in the real world. What e-mail and SMS communicators need to realise is that written communication can, should the wheels come off and lawyers get involved, be used against them. So, cybervitriol is immature and self destructive if this is considered. You cannot, as government spin doctors like to say, be misquoted or quoted out of context when your e-mail or SMS is read out in court.

At this point I am reminded of the Eskom blackouts of two years back and how I am thankful for them because they have created a positive memory for my children. One Friday evening of heavy rains when the Eskom coals got soggy the lights went out. I was alone with my two boys, then 9 and 6 years. I had to prepare our dinner by charcoal and we had dinner by candle light. As there was no TV to watch, the boys

asked me to tell them a story. After thinking for a minute I told them the fable of Tselane and the Giant and The Lion and the Hare that I recalled from primary school. They sat captivated and entranced. They enjoyed every bit of it. I enjoyed it too. Interestingly, it was on that night that I observed that the little one's missing tooth was growing again. I am telling this story to illustrate how technology creates distance between us and that it does help if we do without it at times. As you can see, Eskom blackouts are not all that bad!

My recommendation to couples, especially those who find it easier to send each other e-mails and SMSes, is that they start making time for each other. I actually recommend dating. This is low budget dating which happens as follows: No need to go out and have dinner by candle light. Just make a date to come home early, sit down, face each other and TALK. Another hard recommendation I would make is that people start having a tech-free day every now and then. That is a day of no technology - no TV, no computer and no telephone. As a person who enjoys camping and bush holidays I can vouch for the rejuvenating benefits of taking leave from technology. Going out in the bush or having quiet moments at home is when you start being aware of your senses again and your soul takes a breather. That adds, in small ways, to your being human and in touch again. For as long as we allow technology to rule us, we will lose touch with ourselves and others. So, make time for tech-free, quiet moments and see how you feel afterwards. Believe me, it works.

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