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INTRODUCTION

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The Need to Belong

When Americans, depressed by the scary places where they work and dwell, contemplate some antidote, they often conjure up the image of the American small town. . . . For the idea of a small town represents a whole menu of human values that the gigantism of corporate enterprise has either obliterated or mocked.

—JAMES HOWARD KUNSTLER, *The Geography of Nowhere*

Thought, Word, and Deed

We crave one thing, regardless of race, gender, culture, or social class: *acceptance*. The need to belong is powerful because, introvert or extrovert, we are social creatures with a conscience—the ethical inkblot upon which others and we ourselves make indelible marks. We etch more than outcomes and consequences of our actions there, involving others; we imprint our *thoughts* about actions before even taking them. From karma to Christ, this universal concept of conscience implores us to be mindful about our every *thought, word, and deed*. The conscience is the psyche's "inner ear" and vibrates with emotion—at times pleasant, at times horrifically unpleasant—in response to thoughts, words, and deeds before they are uttered or acted on and then afterward, so we can assess outcome, impact, and possible motive. When we concede, *We know in our hearts that we are right (or wrong)*, we refer to this inner compass. When we acknowledge, *We have lost our way*, we mean that we have not followed this compass. Although others may influence us, the way artists are influenced by masters (role models) or by dilettantes (idols), we are the primary sculptors of conscience; through it, we create magna opera or rock piles of our lives.

According to existential philosophy, we come into the world alone and we leave it alone. Birth and death are bookmarks of the human condition. While entrances and exits on earth may be solitary, our time

on the planet is social and physical, from the paths that we travel in our search for acceptance to the communities that we call home. Communities provide opportunities for acceptance, serving as “gathering place” or “proving ground.” We meet friends, partners, merchants, and neighbors there. Through our interactions, we learn “people skills” and develop values and character.

We thrive in real habitats. Social activist Parker J. Palmer believes the most public place is the street, for there we meet strangers with whom we interact, even when nobody speaks. People send a message through the channel of their bodies in real place, acknowledging that “we occupy the same territory, belong to the same human community.”¹¹ Throughout human history, children have played in neighborhoods, adults have interacted with others there, and entrepreneurs have done business nearby. True, suburban sprawl may have changed the nature of games, interactions, and commerce. Recreation centers may have replaced public parks; developments, homogenized housing; and mega malls, dislodged Main Streets. However, our relationships in these places for the most part remained social and genuine because we still had to communicate with strangers face-to-face. That fact remains pivotal when contemplating ramifications of the interpersonal divide. Even Palmer in his enlightened 1981 book, *The Company of Strangers*, could not foresee the erosion of community beyond the concourses of the mega mall which, he believed, had replaced public streets, deemed unsafe. When people perceive real habitat to be unsafe, Palmer warned, they withdraw from it, and it becomes unsafe. “Space is kept secure not primarily by good lighting or police power but by the presence of a healthy public life,”¹² he writes. The mall may not be the best public space in which to interact authentically with strangers, but it is better than doing so on-line, shopping the digital malls of Amazon.com and eBay. Increasingly in this manner, media and technology displace many of us from physical to virtual environs. Indeed, these days even in the public street a stranger seeking directions in a new city may have to wait patiently for a passerby without a cell phone, headset, or handheld device or risk interrupting another’s virtual reality, the new social faux pas. The impact of living this way is cumulative, blurring boundaries and identities and occupying so much of our time that we have little left at day’s end to devote to hometowns and each other.

Yet the need to belong is as urgent as ever, if not more so. According to Palmer, “More than ever we need the process of public life to

renew our sense of belonging to one another,” without which we pay a terrible price, losing “our sense of comfort and at-homeness in the world.”¹³ As a result, we yearn for acceptance and routinely look to media and technology to bridge the interpersonal void. Electronic communication promised to enhance relationships with family and friends, to increase productivity at work, and to provide us with more leisure time at home; instead, our personal and professional relationships often falter because communication systems alter *value* systems, with the primary emphasis on profit and entertainment; meanwhile, television viewing devours leisure time—a trend Palmer recognized in the early 1980s.¹⁴ Consequently the search for acceptance is apt to be done sitting down in front of screens and monitors. That undermines the vitality of community where values—from civility to trustworthiness—are developed through face-to-face interaction, for even networks of virtuous individuals, when isolated, cannot advance civic virtue.¹⁵ People deprived of interpersonal contact eventually suspect rather than trust others because their perception of reality has been skewed, prompting misinterpretation of messages and motives, thereby harming relationships.¹⁶

The term *community* in the Internet age is as likely to mean “network” as “hometown.” Corporate communities also are “ecosystems,” using a biological model based on mutual benefit—species that help each other, the way bees help flora, by pollinating them. Individual companies may not even compete with each other for turf but depend on each other according to the function of their infrastructures. Ecosystems change partners according to acquisition or corporate symbiosis, so existing systems may not remain intact for long. By way of example, at the end of the twentieth century, news magazine *Time* relied on entertainer Warner (and vice versa) and merged, attracting the interest of America Online. AOL needed content and relied on Time Warner to supply it in exchange for an electronic delivery platform for on-line users. The result? AOL Time Warner. This mega merger heralded “the dawn of a new media age in which former upstart companies of the Internet could dare to acquire powerful, traditional media companies,”¹⁷ write the authors of *Media Debates: Great Issues for the Digital Age*. Everette E. Dennis and John C. Merrill also note other mergers establishing ecosystems which, in turn, have established the convention of such systems in society, including CBS/Westinghouse/Viacom and Disney/CapCities/ABC.

Media ecosystems as symbolized by AOL Time Warner have eroded constitutional freedoms in addition to basic tenets of the American entrepreneurial dream, especially as all this relates to community. We must remember that the blessings of liberty as articulated in the Bill of Rights were responsible for economic prosperity in America. Prosperity has not led to expansion of those freedoms in a so-called information society whose technologies, including the Internet, have been developed in large part by the U.S. military and intrude into our private affairs each day to such extent that most consumers either allow the invasion or purchase more technology to rid us of the pop-ups and spam of our screened and monitored lives.

Too many of us have traded the blessings of liberty founded in the community for the premiums of technology founded in the economy. As Dennis and Merrill remind us,

For years media critics like Ben Bagdikian, former dean of journalism at the University of California–Berkeley, had warned about the negative effect of media concentration, especially on newspapers and broadcasting, where independent, family owned papers and broadcast stations fell in to the hands of big chains like Gannett, Thompson and Newhouse. Although these admonitions seem almost quaint compared to today's really big deals, as one critic called them, they nevertheless reflect deeply held American values that bigness is bad and diversity is good. People often equate freedom of expression and individualism with small-scale social institutions that are close to the people and accessible to all.¹⁸

Large-scale ecosystems symbolized by AOL Time Warner threaten our way of life. Because economic climates are volatile over time, AOL Time Warner may continue in its current formation or morph again into another ecosystem. But that is not the point. The problem with ecosystems has been priorities. Information technology has altered practices of American business, which prided itself on personalized customer service. That era is ending. Typically the focus is on serving interests of the high-tech corporate infrastructure rather than interests of the patron. "Customer service," at best, is usually digital and automated. As such, these ecosystems not only impede communication but also distort our sense of community—even the definition of that term. For instance, AOL Time Warner, like most such systems, promised in

its on-line mission statement to "improve our communities—taking pride in serving the public interest as well as the interests of our shareholders."¹⁹ Serving both interests seems like a "conflict of interest." As all corporations must answer to shareholders, the operative words here are "communities" and "public interest." What communities—our real or our virtual ones? What public interest, and where? AOL Time Warner also promised patrons to promote "an ethic of volunteerism and civic engagement" so that "everyone can share in the benefits of the Internet Revolution." That seems like another conflict of interest. Volunteerism and civic engagement are rooted in physical place—not on the Internet. Microsoft, another such ecosystem, so vast at the start of the twenty-first century that the U.S. government filed an antitrust action, also waxed eloquently about the benefits of "community" in its 2001 on-line values statement: "Microsoft and its employees recognize that we have the responsibility, and opportunity, to contribute to the communities in which we live, in ways that make a meaningful difference to people's lives."²⁰ Who, precisely, is the "we" in that statement and where can we find them other than at Microsoft.com?

This book does not focus on Microsoft or AOL Time Warner. Those companies and their competitors may or may not remain intact or in business in the foreseeable future. Or they may continue to wield vast influence. The contention here is that they and other high-tech ecosystems have helped displace us at home and at work, intensifying our need to belong. As a consequence, most of us think of ourselves as consumers rather than as citizens of a great nation whose strength emanates from social, familial, and community bonds. How did we devalue our collective voice in our quest for acceptance?

The Search for Acceptance

The search for acceptance is intricately linked to the search for community. "Acceptance" is the abstraction—an inner longing for something greater than one's self. "Community" is the external source that provides fulfillment or reaffirmation. Acceptance is associated with the conscience; community, with consciousness. Both are part of the human condition. Past generations found acceptance in community because our interactions there, however challenging or intolerant, taught us essential interpersonal skills. We knew when to look some-

one in the eyes and “stand ground” and, equally as important, when *not* to do so. We knew how to read body language and tone of voice and adjust for them according to time, place, and occasion. We did this because we practiced. As children, we learned that we could stick out our tongues at playmates during recess but not during class. And it mattered at whom we wagged tongues on the school ground. Some would overlook the gesture and others, overreact. We refined our social skills growing up, along with our values—most of which concern treating others as we wish to be treated, that is, the Golden Rule. Schools reinforced that universal lesson. Extended families did, too. And if those families were dysfunctional, we could find mentors in the neighborhood. Now families, schools, neighborhoods, and workplaces are wired, and so are we, feeling displaced in homes and home offices, even though we communicate at ever faster processor speeds.

The first chapter of *Interpersonal Divide*, “Displacement in the Global Village,” deals with this displacement. In attempting to resolve the various digital divides, society has unwittingly created an interpersonal one. That void warrants as much attention as the electronic *ones* because each impacts the other. A society with weak interpersonal skills cannot influence future innovations in media and technology so that they advance priorities of community, from access to education to civic participation. We will continue to spend too much time in virtual rather than real environments—e-mailing, chatting, browsing, computing, and consuming media—increasingly isolated from others, inundated with offers to buy products or services to sate the need to belong. The acquisition of things is a poor substitute for acceptance, just as cyberspace is a poor substitute for community. Such isolation complicates life, not because life has become complex in reality, but because we have forgotten how to cope with the rigors of the human condition.

Chapter Two, “The Human Condition,” gauges the effect of this phenomenon on our conscience and consciousness. The conscience is our inner knowing of right and wrong involving others; consciousness, an awareness of our place in physical space, hometown to cosmos. The conscience demands that we love and be loved by others, that we share meaningful relationships with others, and that we contribute to community. Consciousness in part requires that we foresee the consequences of our thoughts, words, and deeds, enabling us to assess past actions and plan future ones. However, in many of us, overuse of technology and overconsumption of mass media have dulled conscience

and deadened consciousness, forcing us to look for fulfillment in all the wrong cyber places. Instead of seeking acceptance in community with others, the psychologically disenfranchised seek self-help, only to encounter more media and technology—along with marketing ploys—associated with the most popular programs and seminars.

The hype of self-help is covered in Chapter Three, “Habits of a High-Tech Age.” Marketing, rather than common sense, drives the multibillion dollar self-improvement industry that typically ignores the human condition. We all have the same life lessons. As gracefully as possible, we must accept the various beginnings and endings of biological existence: from childhood to childbirth, from middle age to maturity and beyond. People who spend too much time in virtual rather than real environments typically cannot cope with such a challenge. Instead they develop the “Seven Habits of Highly Mediated People,” which include “listening for motive instead of for meaning” and “coveting what we lack and losing what we have.” Add to these an accelerated biological clock, an ominous feeling, and—another product of the high-tech media age—that time is running out, even as our lifespans lengthen. That defies “common sense,” another concept associated with community and one that defines the American psyche, beginning with Thomas Paine. Media and technology, billed as fonts of information, distort common sense.

Imagine traveling to a community and stopping at the visitors’ information center, asking about sites of interest. Instead of reliable data, you get gossip and conjecture. When you complain, you are told that “information” is not necessary grounded in fact. “That doesn’t make sense,” you say. In virtual domains, it *does*. According to historian Theodore Roszak, “In the past, the word (information) has always denoted a sensible statement that conveyed a recognizable, verbal meaning, usually what we would call a fact.”²¹ In the high-tech media age, information has lost its common-sense definition, Roszak notes, and has come to mean electronic messages that can be counted, catalogued, encoded, and decoded. The depreciation of information not only impacts education as Internet use expands, especially in schools, but also the reliability of journalism, with the audience typically unable to decipher fact from factoid and factoid from fiction. Worse, some do not recognize those distinctions. Many more do not care.

Society has faced similar challenges in earlier times of great technological change. Chapter Four documents the impact of media and tech-

nology during the nineteenth century, when mass media and marketing were conceived, along with the telegraph, telephone, and radio. The telegraph has been called "the Victorian Internet." More important, perhaps, for a basis of comparison, Western Union owned the telegraph wires upon which the Associated Press relied to communicate the news—an ecosystem prototype. Brand marketing also evolved, along with chain newspapers, whose owners bought out competitors and created magazines out of them, including the *Ladies Home Journal* and the *Saturday Evening Post*—not necessarily to serve the public, but to provide a forum for national brand merchandise. From this perspective, readers can fathom the foci of their discontent.

The blurring of identity and place has also resulted in social and moral upheavals. Because of media and technology, work now intrudes on family life to such extent that we literally have lost touch with our boundaries, roles, and identities. The phenomenon of access via communication devices is unprecedented in human history, according to a report in the *Sacramento Bee* newspaper, which states:

The ubiquitous nature of access made possible by these devices blurs the lines between personal and work time. When electronic communications become a substitute for face-to-face connections, valued relationships can suffer.²²

The experience has become so widespread that a new, primarily technology-based self-help industry emerged in the early twenty-first century, called "life-balance training," to help people distinguish between work and play and thereby control stress. Chapter Five deals with this social upheaval and documents the impact of the Internet revolution on the family, the educational system, the health care industry, and crime. When we hurt, we shop—pursuing acceptance through possessions rather than through principles. Marketing facilitates that, using high-tech, invasive methods that promise to infiltrate our homes with more precision and alacrity as technologies converge with mass media. In the recent past, marketers mapped "the consumer genome," violating privacy and other values to sell product in the name of the bottom line. That may be the only "line" whose meaning has not blurred in the wake of new technologies.

The medium is the message, social critic Marshall McLuhan proclaimed in the 1960s, envisioning a global village. Instead we have inherited a *global mall*. McLuhan is still viewed as an "Internet

Nostradamus" who prophesied worldwide civic engagement, thanks to technology. McLuhan never foresaw the Web but based his idealism on TV, believing that patterns of low-density lines and dots forced the human brain to interact with the picture tube, to make sense of moving images. His biological model, upon which so much scholarship is based, is flawed scientifically and metaphorically; Chapter Six advances a physics paradigm to explain and explore cyberspace, assessing the impact of virtual habitat, which puts a person in two places simultaneously so that consciousness is split and content of messages, altered.

McLuhan embraced technology, in part because of the antiestablishment baby boomer generation. In the 1960s activists deplored capitalism and demanded reliable information about the Vietnam War in particular and the government in general. Many of those baby boomers would become dot.com moguls in the 1990s and still believe that technology enhances the "information economy." That phrase is used so often that few question its generic meaning. Historian Roszak notes the emptiness of "exuberant talk" about "the information economy" or "the information society."²³ However, he and other social critics fail to assess the gap between baby boomers who associate media and technology with *information* and their children ("X-ers") and/or grandchildren ("Web-sters") who associate media and technology with *entertainment*. Likewise, entertainment is now associated with media and technology, from equipment and upgrades required to download everything from digital movies (removing patrons from public theaters) to on-line gaming (removing enthusiasts from public arcades). "This is all very good news for the elites controlling enterprises involved in the supply of new ICT products and services, as the message neatly complements the sales and promotional efforts of their own marketing divisions,"²⁴ writes Paschal Preston in *Reshaping Communications*, which also criticizes the prevailing ideas of the so-called "Information Society." One such idea advanced by members of the baby boomer generation is that their children utilize media and technology to access education, thereby achieving social mobility. That generational fallacy is another digital divide, eroding relationships at home and work along with the interpersonal skills needed to sustain community.

The emphasis on entertainment has given us icons and caricatures, rather than role models and mentors. Media and technology tend to

flatten perception of community, prodding us to believe that every person and issue has two sides rather than many. Such oversimplification affects the conscience because we no longer can intuit ethics—whose values emanate from community, based on the social norms of our species. When community is displaced, so are our morals. We may yearn for reliable mentors, readily found in real rather than virtual domains, but interact with them and adopt their values so infrequently that we no longer know how to live “three-dimensionally.”

“Living Three-Dimensionally” is the title and focus of the next-to-last chapter. People pursue acceptance to be at peace with and to feel empowered among others. Peace is not the absence of conflict but the inner knowing that one can meet any challenge. Empowerment is the realization of priorities and the recognition of options to realize goals. Those who live three-dimensionally measure the quality of their world:

- *linearly*, in the time spent interacting meaningfully with others in community, from clerks at the checkout counter to VIPs at the country club.
- *horizontally*, in valued relationships that transcend race, sex, and class, acknowledging the insights of others across a broad social spectrum.
- *deeply*, in contributions made to community through those interactions and relationships.

Interpersonal contact is three-dimensional, subject to time, participants, and place. Such contact is a basic component of community for the vast majority of world cultures. In our culture, it can convey ethical values to future generations—values, incidentally, that can shape media and technology in a dual, beneficial association with society. Communication scholars have long noted that “orality,” or unmediated discourse, “creates and sustains cultural values, concretizes the unique understandings embedded within those values, and transmits those values from one generation to the next.”²⁵

To live otherwise is to allow media and technology to alter perception of the world and our place in it. People who consume too much media and use technology too often may develop a myopic outlook on life, viewing issues and events:

- *flatly*, characterizing people as worthy or unworthy, based on their race, class, religion, culture, politic, or belief.

- *episodically*, measuring happiness on outcomes of incidents over which we have little control.

We do have control over ethics and actions. The last chapter of *Interpersonal Divide* addresses that. To repatriate to the village—to families, workplaces, and hometowns—we must analyze the role of technology and media in our lives. We need to temper use. But we also need to use technology and media, astonishing tools, to advance priorities and contribute to the common good. As philosopher Andrew Feenberg writes in *Questioning Technology*, demands for technology that enhances “humane, democratic, and safe work” can influence the future development of electronic communication.²⁶ Before that can happen, however, we must reacquaint ourselves with the mediated effects of electronic communication, from e-mail to mobile phone, ascertaining how each medium alters content and obscures motives, adjusting for that in our interactions. Finally we must ask why we bought a particular device and then determine if we are using it for that purpose. If we do not answer that question, *marketing will*.

The need to belong is a lifelong quest. Although each individual travels a different path to the oracle, each path must wend through real rather than virtual community. Assignments at the end of each chapter emphasize that point through

- *Journal Exercises*, featuring assignments that test key points through firsthand analysis. Exercises assess the impact of media and mediated communication in everyday activities and build on each other, preparing for the next chapter.
- *Discussion/Paper Ideas*, applying insights from readings and exercises and encouraging collaborative learning in a format that requires interpersonal dialogue—the point of *Interpersonal Divide*. This section has three other features:
 1. *It reemphasizes central theses and themes on each chapter topic.*
 2. *It reaffirms journal observations in a shared setting.*
 3. *It tests the validity of assertions in the text, fostering reflection and debate.*
- *Suggested Readings*, featuring books that affirm or present a different viewpoint on the chapter topic. Several works, published in past decades, were included because their insights have not become obsolete like yesterday’s software. Enduring ideas and ideals shape perception and sharpen debate.

Assignments are meant to remind readers about what they know in the depth of their conscience and breadth of their consciousness—the significance of interpersonal skills, the social consequences when we neglect them, and the benefits when we utilize them in our high-tech media world.



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CHAPTER ONE

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Displacement in the Global Village

The evolution of media has decreased the significance of physical presence in the experience of people and events. One can now be an audience to a social performance without being physically present; one can communicate “directly” with others without meeting in the same place. As a result, the physical structures that once divided our society into many distinct spatial settings for interaction have been greatly reduced in social significance.

—JOSHUA MEYROWITZ, *No Sense of Place*

High-Tech and Original Habitats

We are living in an era of rapid population growth and community displacement. That combination will spawn many challenges in the twenty-first century—chief among them, the ability to communicate clearly and resolve differences in a high-tech media age. Interpersonal skills are needed now more than ever. As population in the United States expands from 275 million to 375 million by 2025, we must develop effective means to cope face-to-face with neighbors, strangers, employers, coworkers, relatives, and friends. That prospect, however, appears unlikely unless we come to terms with displacement—an unfathomable feeling of isolation not only in our hometowns but also in our *homes*—connected, wired, and cabled to the outside world.

Displacement used to occur in real habitat. Developers would build subdivisions or engineers would construct highways or dams, destroying community infrastructures and causing property values to rise or fall. Displacement happened in the aftermath of natural disasters, too—hurricanes and floods, for instance—or manmade ones, including chemical spills, toxic dumps, gangland racketeering, and rural or urban flight. Historically, technology (in all its mechanical forms)

precipitates displacement. Following World War II, mass production of cars altered municipal planning, resulting in a mosaic of interstates, highways, and roads replete with strip and mega malls, truck and rest stations, chain restaurants, and billboards. Journalist James Howard Kunstler has documented that transformation which powered our economy until communication technology took hold in the 1990s. Kunstler dubs physical displacement “the process of destruction,” which obliterated distinctions between “city life” and “country life” and which has led to “a landscape of scary places, the geography of nowhere, that has simply ceased to be a credible human habitat.”²⁷

Having ravaged physical habitat, corporate ecosystems are sulling virtual habitat. Kunstler’s premise, “the geography of nowhere,” the title of his bestselling 1994 book, was metaphoric. He contended that displacement to accommodate automobiles homogenized the U.S. landscape, so that every place looked like no place in particular. What was metaphoric in 1994 has become factual in our time. We who live in the silicon valleys of the interpersonal divide travel the same interstates in our automobiles, whizzing by billboards and eating at the same chain restaurants while speaking on mobile phones, oblivious of the displaced countryside. We open garage doors by remote to enter houses without stepping outside, retreat to solitary computer rooms with high-speed access, and download messages and spam from Internet highways with televisions providing background noise like the automobile hum of yore.

Media appliances and computer technology displace us in confines of our homes. The typical middle-class house contains a television set for each family member and computers for the parents and children. To put this into perspective, the total number of television sets at the start of the twenty-first century was 267 million, according to the National Association of Broadcasters—approaching the benchmark of nearly one TV set for each man, woman, and child in the United States.²⁸ That figure will continue to grow as high-definition television sets and other innovations take hold, remaindering traditional sets to the electronic dump yard. All segments of society are gaining in computer access, too, even members of low-income wired households. In 2001, writes Sonia Arrison, director of the Center for Technology Studies at the Pacific Research Institute, “25 percent of lower income people were online, and if things continue at this rate, it won’t be long before vir-

tually everyone who wants to connect can.”²⁹ Computer use has grown so rapidly—with 60 percent of homes having access—that discarded units have become a major environmental concern. Studies show that more than 55 million PCs are to be buried as solid waste, with lead-based monitors and CPUs contaminating landfills.³⁰

Other gadgets keep members of households homebound and apart from each other. Add to TV and PC use telephones with separate lines and caller identifications, “family” cell phones with myriad media functions, answering machines, laptops, Web and video cameras, Internet stations, security and video monitors, motion detectors, handheld devices, gaming consoles, DVD and digital audio players, CD stereo systems, wave radios, cable and satellite access, and more. People who use these gadgets and consume these services in their homes are spending more time apart from each other and their friends and neighbors. Then they go to work and use the same gadgets again. Then they become depressed because of work-related stress or family-related dysfunction and seek self-improvement . . . again using the same appliances and services that are the source of their problems, listening to inspirational videos or visiting Web sites instead of resolving issues interpersonally, face-to-face.

The African proverb embraced by Hillary Clinton—“It takes a village to raise a child”—nevertheless acknowledges the vitality of community, which provides basic human needs, from child and health care to education and employment. In essence the maxim emphasizes the communal ethic of cooperation and engagement. We should take note. It will take more than a *digital* global village to raise a child in the twenty-first century. Technology can surveil children at day care but not care for them. It can visit houses virtually through telemedicine but not make house calls interpersonally. It can facilitate distance learning but not engage learners without physical facilities. It can host neighborhood associations at a Web site address without “neighbors” ever associating on-site at a real address.

Howard Rheingold overlooks these points in his influential 1993 book, *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier*, which carries a retraction in 2000, noting “nostalgia” for genuine community and asking questions like this in hindsight: “To what extent are strong, intimate relationships possible on the Net?”³¹ Rheingold begins his book with an anecdote about his daughter:

"Daddy is saying 'Holy moly!' to his computer again!"

Those words have become a family code for the way my virtual community has infiltrated our real world. My seven-year-old daughter knows that her father congregates with a family of invisible friends who seem to gather in his computer. Sometimes he talks to them, even if nobody else can see them. And she knows that these invisible friends sometimes show up in the flesh, materializing from the next block or the other side of the planet.

Rheingold's anecdote was cute in 1993. By 2000 it was obsolete. The typical seven-year-old daughter in the author's income bracket already would have learned from parental example and would no longer hover gleefully around Daddy's enchanted PC. She would be on-line in her room with her own computer. The "magic" of cyber-friends, naively depicted as "invisible friends," would already have become her social norm. Between 1993 and 2000 many children went from playing in parks in front of neighbors . . . to playing in mall arcades in front of parents . . . to playing in living-rooms on consoles in front of each other . . . to playing online in their rooms in front of no one in a place that is actually not there. "No matter how much we work and play in cyberspace, we don't really live there, and we can't eat there either,"³² writes Laura J. Gurak in *Cyberliteracy: Navigating the Internet with Awareness*. While acknowledging cyberspace as a virtual place, Gurak emphasizes that users are material beings with physical needs and desires. Awareness, rather than community, is her dominant theme. Fair enough. But we also need to be aware of the loss of community and the impact on our well-being. "Consequences of what we do on the Internet resound in our physical world," she adds, "and as the world becomes more and more wired, it will be increasingly critical for people to step back and recognize how the virtual affects the physical."³³

Far from making life more convenient and work easier, media and technology have blurred the boundaries between home and work so that work intrudes on family and family on work to such extent that many of us no longer know where we are—literally. Employers use e-mail, voice mail, and mobile phones to interrupt activities from sex to camping on weekdays and holidays, in the name of productivity. Conversely, children and spouses interrupt business meetings with inquiries about when to order pizza and what to put on it, in the name of convenience. Productivity and convenience are banes, not benefits, for typical consumers. Machines that promise them obscure interper-

sonal boundaries, placing individuals in virtual habitats at odds with physical circumstances. That defines displacement. That creates the interpersonal divide. Each habitat, virtual or physical, necessitates different roles, voice tones, gestures, diction, and interactions. Moreover each medium—from e-mail to mobile phone, from chat room to Web cam—changes the message so that misinterpretation of motive abounds, complicating relationships and increasing stress. Although the circumstances of displacement vary, all such scenarios will have in common:

- Clash of environments, virtual and real.
- Blurring of work-home boundaries.
- Blurring of role and identity.
- Influence on values and priorities.
- Impact of all of the above on relationships.

Increasingly, work displaces family life and vice versa. Americans on average work more than almost any other people in the industrialized world and with fewer holidays, a trend likely to continue because of electronic communication. Studies show that Americans enjoy only 16.5 hours of leisure per week, adding almost an extra month of work since the early 1980s—a number predicted to grow in the digital years ahead.³⁴ More time at work means more interaction with technology. In her watershed book on the topic, *The Overworked American*, Juliet B. Schor not only points to the computer as a factor in the decline of leisure but also in the decline of interpersonal skills. "Once people become acclimated to the speed of the computer," she writes, "normal human intercourse becomes laborious."³⁵ Intrusions and interruptions are the norm, from pop-up Web pages to instant messages. The technology entertains and advertises as much as it educates or informs. At home we compute and consume media in separate rooms in the same dwelling. Leisure time traditionally devoted to family life is increasingly spent mainly watching television, with more than 75 percent of U.S. twelve-year-olds with a set in their bedrooms.³⁶ Family members require separate televisions, computers, telephones, and other gadgets and services because programming—from cable to software—is pegged to a person's perceived needs and desires, according to marketing research. So parents and children typically are alone consuming media and using technology, clicking here and there via mouse, button, or remote, seeking community in an elusive, never-ending browse.

The search for community in the Judeo-Christian culture is biblical, literally and metaphorically. It is the dominant theme in Genesis. Eden is the "original" habitat. Adam and Eve feel no shame "naked" in paradise before God. They seek neither approval nor acceptance. However, after eating fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, they feel shame and wear clothes, trying to hide their betrayal from God. He casts them out of paradise, and the search for community begins, becoming more pronounced with Cain and Abel. God favors Abel but appeals to Cain: "If you do what is right, will you not be accepted?" (Genesis 4:7). Doing right by God is the lesson of Adam and Eve. Doing right by *others* is the lesson of Cain and Abel. The first lesson appeals to the conscience, our inner knowledge of right and wrong. The second lesson appeals to consciousness, an instinctual awareness of how our actions affect others. When Cain ignores the lesson and slays his brother, he is forced to spend the rest of his life as "a restless wanderer on earth" (Genesis 4:12). The Adam and Eve narrative is as intricately linked to the Cain and Abel narrative as the conscience is to consciousness. The lesson is universal. Conscience and consciousness must work in tandem harmoniously for us to meet everyday challenges—and enjoy the abundant rewards—of life in community with others.

That consummate rule transcends culture, region, and religion. The Genesis story, like so many other parables and tracts, foreshadows the Golden Rule: *Do unto others what you would have them do unto you*. Confucius believed that "reciprocity" was the highest principle of conduct: *Do not do to others what you do not want them to do to you* (Analects 15.23). Similar truths also can be found in Hinduism, Islam, and Buddhism and appeal to conscience and consciousness, constructs of the human condition, covered in the next chapter. A rudimentary knowledge of these concepts is useful at this point, however, to illustrate the search for community.

Conscience and consciousness are metaphysical, or beyond scientific measurement. Nevertheless, they determine as much as our genome whether we will lead fulfilling and productive lives or empty, painful ones. Philosophers have debated the essence of conscience and consciousness for centuries because those aspects of human existence influence the well-being of nations as well as individuals. Although philosophers may use different terminologies or advance various theories, too esoteric or speculative to enumerate here, many would agree that the conscience demands:

- That we love and be loved by others.
- That we have meaningful relationships with others.
- That we contribute to community.

Consciousness demands:

- That we see the world as it actually is rather than how we would like it to be.
- That we foresee the impact of our actions before taking them.
- That we assess consequences of past actions to make informed choices in the future.

When we live by those tenets, we experience acceptance. We feel balanced, whole. We can empathize with others but also take action when necessary, employing as much power as needed to address a situation without creating greater problems or causing harm to innocent others. We not only contribute to community; we derive joy from it. Others praise our character, adopt our values, and seek us as role models or mentors—the highest honor that neighbors can bestow. We lead by example rather than decree. That is the age-old standard. Before the self-help guru and the celebrity psychologist, before the televangelist and motivational speaker, role models and mentors inspired us to interact honorably among others in community and to leave a situation or place in better condition than we found it. When we did that, we found something else: *acceptance flows from within*.

The Interpersonal Divide

Lacking acceptance, we feel unloved. Lacking love, we feel afraid. Maybe we should. When we lose a sense of place, we also lose a sense of occasion—how to behave in real time and place in the company of others. We are forgetting how to resolve problems without creating greater ones because we are more apt to use electronic communication to mediate our disputes, instead of resolving them face-to-face. We may misinterpret motives because the messages we send and receive do not convey the subtle but vital voice tones, body movements, and other guiding interpersonal cues of physical place. We cannot "get along" with each other because we don't know how to "get on" with each other, showing grace and forgiveness in the wake of grievance or transgression. While most pundits and educators debate the digital divide, bemoaning the underclass of people without computer

access, a wider fault line has been eroding communities: the *interpersonal divide*.

Road rage. School shootings. Race riots. Workplace violence. Domestic violence. Media thrive on such stories because they showcase the elements of sensational news, especially compelling video. Real news is inherently sensational, as the world witnessed during the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks in New York City, Washington D.C., and western Pennsylvania. The medium united Americans across the country, but for many international viewers, the vast United States seemed at the edge of collapse, along with the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center. (That, of course, was a built-in aspect of the terrorists' goal.) Relatives and friends watching CNN around the globe e-mailed or phoned residents thousands of miles from the attack to see if they were all right. Alas, as the hijackers also knew, flying planes into the Trade Center and Pentagon, television news increases fear as it decreases geographical boundaries.

The terrorist attacks caught the news media by surprise. In the preceding months, reporters were engrossed in a sordid affair involving Congressman Gary Condit and intern Chandra Levy, still missing in September 2001 (and later discovered murdered). The media hyped speculation that Condit may have had a role in Levy's disappearance, which law enforcement could not substantiate. Death by foul play is tragic, of course; but in this case the media embellished conjecture until the coverage became trite. Juxtaposition of the tragic and trite exposed the overconsumption of rehashed news, televised seven days a week, twenty-four hours a day—the same seven minutes around the clock. That warps our sense of place. The medium of choice—television—narrows perception as it increases apprehension of the world. As a result we often interact reluctantly with those who share our space, believing the world to be more dangerous than it actually is, a self-fulfilling prophecy.

This is more than cultivation theory—the notion that we tend to view reality in the manner that television depicts it. This is a simple fact of hours in the day. If we spend them consuming media, we lose them interacting with others in real environments. That enhances any cultivation effect compounded by commercial messages that sponsor media and target our fears even more than the news. The focus on fear is longstanding, dating back to the early twentieth century, when emerging corporations began marketing national brands and feeding the consumerism still running rampant in today's high-tech media

world. As social economist Juliet B. Schor explains, revisiting the history of advertising in the 1920s, "For the first time, business began to use advertising as a psychological weapon against consumers. 'Scare copy' was invented. Without Listerine, Postum, or a Buick, the consumer would be left a spinster, fall victim to a crippling disease, or be passed over for a promotion."³⁷

Fear is the fuel of marketing. That is not a play on words. The phrase *optimum level of fear* is a marketing concept. Marketers compile statistics on potential customers, identifying perceived needs, often associated with acceptance. Advertisers utilize data to create commercials—about a hair- or weight-loss product, say. Data might indicate that people in a certain age or income bracket worry about aging, confusing loss of hair with loss of love (or loss of weight with gain thereof). Advertisements exploit that fear, using before-and-after testimonials of bald or obese partners who once yearned for intimacy and found it, thanks to an over-the-counter elixir endorsed by an actor or clinician. The "before" testimonial generates the fear and the "after" testimonial, the persuasion, affirmed by the endorsement and "money-back" guarantee, so that customers actually have "nothing to lose." Commercials can generate too much fear, embellishing testimonials; or persuasion can be weak, with unlikely or unenthusiastic endorsements. But when fear and persuasion combine, the optimum—or prime motivator—has been achieved.

Buying habits emanate out of *epistemic* emotions—or knowledge of consequences—chief among them, fear and hope. "To put people in a state of fear," write professors John and Nicholas Jackson O'Shaughnessy, authors of *The Marketing of Emotion*, "advertisers need to dramatize the unpleasant consequences and stress the high probability of their occurring."³⁸ In other words, if men in middle age believe that women dislike baldness (Condition A), and deduce that baldness will deprive them of romantic opportunities (Consequence B), then fear of that scenario will prompt them to purchase a hair-loss product in the hope that it will break the link between Condition A and Consequence B. In describing the power of emotion, the O'Shaughnessys note that empirical studies show that the more fear is aroused in consumers, the more likely they will take preventive measures. "This being so," they write, "advertising would find it advantageous to give the target audience information on some or all of the following: (1) the severity and nearness of the threat; (2) the probability of its occurrence;

(3) the effectiveness of certain coping strategies; and (4) the speed and ease with which the coping response can be implemented.”³⁹ When those components align harmoniously, the optimal level of fear will have been achieved, causing consumers to reach for their credit cards (a font of marketing data in the first place).

Methods promise to become more invasive. As computer and television networks fuse with “interactive TV” (the ultimate oxymoron) marketers can target fear more precisely and direct it into specific homes and even into specific *rooms* in such homes. The father in his home office will learn more about Viagra, the mother in the exercise room about Metabolite, the son in the family room about End-Zit, and the daughter in the bedroom about WonderBreast. Fear of rejection will be the common denominator in this household, displacing family members. As journalist James Howard Kunstler notes, when television becomes the focal point of family life, the entire house is sealed off from the outside world, which family members view as “an abstraction filtered through television, just as the weather is an abstraction filtered through air conditioning.”⁴⁰ Marketers help create the abstraction by emphasizing optimum levels of fear, undermining perception of community.

Marketing has become so influential because techniques are powered by technology. For instance, marketers do not have to invest as much anymore in expensive direct mail campaigns with supervisors assessing cost versus effectiveness. Expenses have shifted from company to consumer. Companies send bulk e-mail “spam” or place “cookies”—files inserted into home computers that chart purchasing patterns—with cost assessed to the customer who pays for Internet access. Apart from questions about privacy, refinement of target audiences can lead to deceptive practices, writes Herbert Rotfeld, professor of marketing at Auburn University and author of the aptly named book, *Adventures in Misplaced Marketing*. Rotfeld believes that marketers with access to computerized data could direct deceptive television commercials via cable to susceptible audiences. “Infomercials could use cable networks to prey upon the worries and fears of selected groups. And also in theory, various vulnerable individuals could be specifically targeted for deceptive messages they are prone to believe via the Internet. Children, elderly or more gullible people would have tailor-made deceptive messages sent directly to their computer screens.”⁴¹ In sum, the optimal level of fear has become easier to achieve, thanks to converging technologies.

The search for acceptance used to be conducted in community. Now it is conducted as much in virtual as physical place. That widens the interpersonal divide and, in part, addresses why the venerable task of deepening conscience and expanding consciousness has become so difficult in our time. People intuit this and seek self-help, to be covered later. The self-improvement industry also utilizes media and technology which, in turn, must answer to marketing. People answer to the human condition, learning to hear conscience and heed consciousness and eventually balancing the two—or else they suffer consequences of community. That has been the norm until recently. What changed is reliance on technology to mediate discourse, hindering conscience, and on media to inform consciousness, hindering our vision of and place in the world. Self-help programs usually cannot correct that view when they rely on the same electronic devices and marketing ploys—from motivational videos on leadership habits (with spam offers, direct mail catalogues, and on-line boutiques), to virtual psychotherapy (with consultations via e-mail)—targeting likely consumers and treating them according to credit card balance rather than emotional balance.

The human condition brooks no shortcuts to wellness. The ancients understood this, from Moses to Mohammad, from Socrates to Siddhartha. Living ethically requires lifelong commitment and regular assessment. Then as now communication was key. Without communication, we lack the ability to share ideas, explain intent, express love, enjoy relationships, and contribute substantially to society. Without communication, consciousness is equally misinformed. We cannot perceive reality or evaluate the true impact of our thoughts, words, and deeds. Until recently, however, communication was mostly interpersonal, or face-to-face. People spoke plainly to each other—sometimes appropriately and sometimes, inappropriately—but usually authentically because of facial gestures, tone of voice, time of day, occasion of place, possibility of witnesses, and so on. We could read expressions of love, hate, or indifference in body language and could interpret ill intent or goodwill first hand, without needing media analysts to construe the situation or technology to process that information at ever-faster speeds.

We live now in cabled enclaves. Too many of us feel anxious not because we fail to communicate—for we *do* communicate too frequently with each other electronically—but because of fundamental high-tech fallacies. Many consumers buy technology because they believe it saves

time and improves communication, not only with friends and associates, but also with corporations and organizations—enhancing relationships. Such beliefs are suspect. Consider these fallacies about technology and the interpersonal lessons required to overcome them:

1. *Widespread availability of electronic devices assures swift communication with others.* The availability sets up false expectations that others with e-mail, mobile phones, and Internet access should be contacting us or replying quickly to our messages. When they don't, perhaps because they are inundated with spam or interacting with others, we feel emotionally displaced. The fallacy is associated with time and place. Our biological clocks, as we shall learn, have been reset by computers and our sense of occasion—the appropriateness of a message based on content, timing, and relationship—hopelessly distorted. Many of us bought technology because it promised to bring us closer to others or help us work more efficiently. Because technology is instantaneous we anticipate speedy replies to messages, regardless of our relationships with others—from family in the next town to strangers in the next hemisphere—and grow testy when experiencing delays. Often we feel betrayed when e-mail addresses or phone numbers are blocked out so that we cannot communicate whenever, wherever, and to whomever we wish. Lesson: *Technology may function "on demand" but people usually do not.*

2. *Communication tools ensure access to companies.* Companies require consumers to use computer technology to access accounts or partake in promotions or other benefits, charging fees if people want personal treatment. The fallacy here is that access to companies would benefit the consumer, providing service on demand. We may assume that we can access such treatment with a Touch-Tone telephone, as long as we are willing to wade through complex dial systems. We wait, listening to promotional audio, growing impatient, often only to get an operator who lacks authority to answer questions or make decisions. When that happens, people feel displaced and manipulated on three levels: they pay fees to contact someone who lacks interpersonal skills or information; they are denied computer access or are forced to use it; they must communicate with machines. Lesson: *Access to companies is apt to benefit companies rather than consumers.*

3. *Communication technology enhances personal and professional relationships.* This fallacy involves advertising best-case scenarios. That

works with depictions of hamburgers because ground beef on a bun is basically ground beef on a pun. True, the burger that you order at the counter may not be perfectly cooked and presented appealingly with ultra-crisp lettuce and juicy red tomato. But this quality burger is possible occasionally if not often. In the end, ground beef is ground beef and lettuce, lettuce. Best-case scenarios about communication technology—such as gleeful America Online users proclaiming, *We have mail!*—convey an inherently deceptive notion that engaging in e-mail fosters acceptance. E-mail is just as likely to deprive users of that feeling. As media critics warned us in the 1960s, content and intent of our messages change when we communicate them to others through machines. Simple questions—"Where have you been? When are you coming home?"—mean one thing when uttered face to face, depending on place, voice tone, circumstance, and occasion; and another thing when mediated by computer, answering machine, or telephone. In the first instance, the person asking the questions conveys subtleties of motive; however, in the second instance, the medium deletes those subtleties, forcing the listener to figure it all out. That is difficult, without customary interpersonal cues, and may prompt users to misinterpret content and intent. Lesson: *Electronic communication is as apt to complicate as enhance relationships, displacing us at home and at work.*

Displacement, at the epicenter of the interpersonal divide, impacts the economy, too. In a sequel to *The Geography of Nowhere*, titled *Home from Nowhere*, James Howard Kunstler observes that healthy communities were also supported by local economies. Those economies, Kunstler asserts, have been "extirpated by an insidious corporate colonialism that doesn't care about the places from which it extracts its profits or the people subject to its operations. Without the underpinning of genuine community and its institutions, family life has predictably disintegrated, because the family alone cannot bear all the burdens and perform all the functions of itself and the community."⁴² The stress on families is exacerbated when wage earners are displaced by computers.

Big Box Displacement

An issue in many communities concerns debate about so-called "big box" retailers like Wal-Mart displacing local entrepreneurs. Ironically, anti-sprawl activists voicing concern about local economies have cre-

ated hundreds of Web sites combating big box displacement. One such top site at the turn of the century was *sprawl-busters.com*, which heralded Al Norman as the guru of the anti-Wal-Mart movement. *Sprawl-busters*, a prototypical site influenced by Internet marketing techniques, states that:

Al Norman achieved national attention in October of 1993 when he successfully stopped Wal-Mart from locating in his hometown of Greenfield, Massachusetts. Since then he has appeared on 60 Minutes, and gained widespread media attention from the Wall Street Journal to *Fortune* magazine.⁴³

Sprawl-busters also reported that Norman was editor of the monthly publication *Sprawl-Busters Alert* and author of *Slam-Dunking Wal-Mart!: How You Can Stop Superstore Sprawl in Your Hometown*, with checks for the book payable to Raphael Marketing in Atlantic City.⁴⁴ Nonetheless, anti-sprawl activists like Norman make good arguments about local businesses being displaced by big box merchants. Unfortunately, activists often rely on media coverage and computer technology to advance their viewpoint. Doing so, they overlook a far more menacing "big box" displacement in front of them—the PC monitor and TV screen.

Digital displacement erodes civic rights, guaranteed by the First Amendment. Whatever you think about Wal-Mart—or anti-megastore activists, for that matter—digital displacement deletes physical place, and with it, rights of assembly and petition. Assembly, in the traditional sense, not only requires locale but also symbol to deepen awareness of abusive power or social injustices. For instance, Dr. Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech was delivered in 1963 on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, an apt symbol etched in collective conscience. How effective would that speech have been without that representative backdrop? Because symbol is associated with place, activists and media alike tend to target the Wal-Marts of commerce and government rather than digital counterparts that promulgate virtual rather than real access.

John Seigenthaler, chairman emeritus of *The Tennessean* and founder of the First Amendment Center at Vanderbilt University, sees a parallel between perceptions of nuclear energy in the 1960s and Internet in the current one. As a young Tennessean, Seigenthaler was schooled about the economic potential of atomic power. "It was only after being a jour-

nalist and an editor that I realized that all those editorials we had written about safety of nuclear power and the equation of Tennessee Valley Authority as motherhood was flawed,"⁴⁵ he said. Seigenthaler believes that the public has been conditioned to think of anything on the Internet in the same way that he in another time thought about the TVA and nuclear power. "Whenever I meet technologists who are caught up in the sweep and miracle of Internet I am reminded of TVA and atomic power. It shouldn't take a Chernobyl to alert us to the fact that there is a gnawing at the commercial Internet concerning some practices that are not only bawdy but also cheap."

In actuality, Amazon.com and eBay also damage local businesses and sustainable economies. However, activists lodge relatively few protests against these e-commerce megastores, mainly because there is no place to assemble in cyberspace. In other words, there is no "there" there without which activists cannot disrupt Chamber of Commerce meetings, make speeches at City Council, display signs at building sites, and position themselves in front of bulldozers and authorities. Paul McMasters, First Amendment ombudsman for the Freedom Forum and former associate editorial director of *USA Today*, notes that assembly—"one of the orphan freedoms along with petition"⁴⁶—doesn't get sufficient attention in First Amendment debates, especially ones addressing new technologies. "Freedom of expression doesn't mean much without assembly and petition because those two things are the best ways to galvanize and organize public support and get the attention of the people in power." Meanwhile, activists targeting Wal-Mart will share and vend their protest techniques on-line while digital mega malls like Amazon.com and eBay displace businesses on Main Street without anyone knowing it because of the absence of place.

The more we bridge the digital divide, the more likely consumers will buy on-line. According to Arbitron, a media and marketing research firm, seven out of ten U.S. households had Internet access as of 2002, one out of four people used Internet at work, and four in ten purchased goods on-line, with those figures apt to burgeon each year with increasing broadband access.⁴⁷ Anti-sprawl activists and supportive neighborhood groups may want to refocus their attention on the technology in their own domains. Chances are, they already have been assimilated with the rest of us into the ranks of marketing and technology, sharing similar social psychographics:

- Wasting too much time in the nothingness of cyberspace.
- Spending too much money accessing that nothingness.
- Feeling that nothingness instinctively because there literally is no “there” there.

Worse, we have forgotten how to locate the “there”—through meaningful interaction with others in the community or through meaningful contributions to the community. This is a relatively recent phenomenon. Civic engagement involving face-to-face interaction had been steadily rising in the twentieth century (except during the Depression); since the 1960s, however, such involvement has plummeted, even though mailing list membership, facilitated by technology, shows expanding membership lists.⁴⁸ In part, this is only natural, because society is suffering symptoms associated with mediated communication, undermining any momentary impulse to participate in community: lying, deceiving, being uncivil, overreacting to perceived slights, simplifying problems to place blame, listening for motive instead of for meaning and, worst of all, coveting what we lack and losing what we have. These “7 Habits of Highly Mediated People” are covered in Chapter Three.

Such behaviors endanger the American dream. Owning a business is part of that dream. In the past entrepreneurs attracted patrons by interacting with customers, creating jobs in neighborhoods, and sponsoring community events. Big box merchants, particularly Wal-Mart, are poor substitutes for general stores on Main Street whose surviving shopkeepers are being displaced again, this time by media and technology.

This, too, was predictable. The easy dot.com days of the latter 1990s created fortunes out of thin air, inflating market values of untested companies touting high-tech services. Several such companies were phantom, luring investors with illusory accounting and slick Web design techniques to conjure notions of unlimited growth. People poured life savings into tech stocks and mutual funds. But many novice investors failed to realize that markets trade in a *symbolic* rather than a real world, from the icons that identify corporations on the digital tickertape to the estimates that determine their worth. Symbolic and virtual worlds have much in common. As Berkeley physicist and political scientist Gene Rochlin writes in his award-winning commentary on technology, *Trapped in the Net: The Unanticipated Consequences of Computerization*,

Because markets trade in wealth rather than creating it, because what they deal in are symbols and promises rather than tangible goods, they have been able to exploit the new opportunities of computers, the computerized databases and information systems, and computerized networks almost as quickly as the technical means have progressed. In the process, they have transformed the structure of the financial world in ways that were never anticipated.⁴⁹

One unanticipated consequence of computerization has been the transformation of public libraries and local bookstores. They have lost patrons because of Internet access. As Scott Carlson writes in “The Deserted Library” in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, “Clearly, the burgeoning use of electronic databases has sent the buzz of library activity onto the Internet. The shift leaves many librarians and scholars wondering and worrying about the future of what has traditionally been the social and intellectual heart of campus. . . .”⁵⁰ Similarly, local bookstores have been the social and intellectual heart of communities. They contributed to the economy too. Owner-managers, even ones of national chains, hired assistant managers, sales associates, and customer service and maintenance staff. In the 1980s several stores opened cafés so that customers could relax with latté and a good read. For all purposes, that predominant milieu changed after Amazon.com entered the market.

Amazon poses as a national chain but circumvents the added costs of erecting or leasing community outlets across the country. Neither does it need a huge national sales force the way Wal-Mart does to sell product interpersonally, face-to-face, or maintenance crews to keep up stores. Customer service is via e-mail, requiring less interaction and fewer representatives. Central addresses must be maintained, of course, but they are full of computers that communicate with the computers of distributors. That kind of automation supposedly cuts costs, along with the work force. With all this cost-cutting, and with 30 million cumulative customers at the start of the twenty-first century—with roughly one Amazon employee serving every 4,000 patrons—the corporation, founded in 1995, still struggled to post a net profit into the twenty-first century. As Lee Barney, writing for *TheStreet.com*, quipped, “When is \$1 billion in quarterly online sales just not good enough? When you’re Amazon.com, and you spend more than that in the same time frame.”⁵¹ Perhaps in the future Amazon will succeed, falter, or merge with a nurturing ecosystem. Concerning displacement,

however, the issue at hand is "growth" versus profit. That is the ecosystem conundrum, and Amazon has become the standard. When the company halted plans in 2001 to add a \$40 million addition to its existing building in Seattle, a company spokesperson observed that Amazon is "getting healthy by slowing down growth and spending and adjusting supply to better suit demand, which is far lower than what every dot-com anticipated."⁵² Predictably Amazon planned to achieve "health" by laying off 1,300 workers, a move that augured more technology and automated customer service. Amazon may rehire those workers or provide more personalized service in the future. But these scenarios are superfluous. Their impact on local business is the point.

Increasingly companies operating in physical place must compete with rivals in virtual place. Media ecosystems do this effortlessly. Local entrepreneurs do so at risk. Consider local bookstore owners. Sooner or later they contend with Amazon and spend part of their operating budgets on technology and domain names—aboutmybookstore.com or similar concoctions. Then they dole out for domain services, including notices for renewal or listings in databases. In cyberspace, everyone pays.⁵³ In addition to physical costs, entrepreneurs start paying virtual costs to do business on Main Street *and* on the Internet, creating and updating Web sites and buying software, computer access, and accessories. Following Amazon's lead, many downsize staff, automate customer service, and measure quarterly earnings rather than net profits, inflating the technology sector of a service economy that, oxymoronically, *lacks* service. As Herbert Rotfeld quips in *Adventures in Misplaced Marketing*, "Without bad service, there wouldn't be any service at all."⁵⁴

Historian Theodore Roszak observes that the current so-called "information economy" is overpopulated by "service companies," including credit bureaus, data managers, and marketing experts. According to Roszak, "These enterprises, in turn, have helped to create a thrusting new profession of computer systems specialists whose assignment is to brainstorm more and more applications for information technology and to sell those applications to every business on the scene."⁵⁵

Computer-assisted marketing, in particular, has exacerbated the interpersonal divide. Why should customers feel valued when routine service is denied them? Why should they feel important in their homes when customer service representatives require that they voice complaints via e-mail, only to be answered by computers decoding common scripts via "artificial intelligence," another on-line oxymoron

along with "tech support"? Technology was supposed to offer the consumer more choices. Because of marketing, each choice comes with a fee. Spam pop-up offers continually interrupt word processing and Web browsing, forcing users to endure the ubiquitous hourly onslaught unless, of course, they purchase pop-up killer software. In this, they have a choice. Telephone companies and other utilities inform consumers that they will be charged monthly fees if they keep paying bills with checks rather than with credit cards on-line. The choice is in the credit card, not in the method of payment. Consumers pay similar fees associated with cable access; computer and software support; electronic banking; video and audio feeds, Internet memberships, subscriptions, library access and more, with services sliced up and apportioned out to anyone willing to pay them without companies honoring the most basic component of customer service: *loyalty*.

Loyalty is a value associated with time and trust. Companies used to build loyalty over time through dependable service. That generates trust, a powerful motivator associated with "brand loyalty." The authors of *The Marketing of Emotion* define trust as an occasional unequal exchange between consumer and merchant, noting: "We may accept the higher price, the delay in service, and so on because we trust the supplier will make amends in the longer term."⁵⁶ That may no longer apply with on-line purchases because of technology, which routinely overlooks the longer term, operating in an instantaneous environment with little, if any, follow-up by customer representatives, once a product has been ordered. Representatives who do follow up are usually only interested in selling additional accessories or services, using the original purchase as an excuse to contact the consumer. The result is an emphasis on selling at all costs, eroding standards of trust, which many merchants placed in technology rather than in people. In essence the tool meant to help us at the workplace, to make life simpler or efficient, has metamorphosed into something ominous when we were looking at economic indicators rather than ourselves. "[W]e have become the objects of our own technology. The toolmaker has become the tool,"⁵⁷ writes Dinesh D'Souza, policy analyst and John M. Olin Research Fellow. That sums up the situation. Technology has reversed the natural order of things.

Much of this book is common sense. The adage—*If something seems too good to be true, it probably is*—pertains to the overselling of technology as a way to keep in touch. Communication technology is too

good to be true, and nothing—even holography technology that simulates depth and dimension—can substitute for the real thing. Many of us understand this on some level. But few of us are acting on that knowledge. Fact is, emotional breakdowns are usually preceded by communication breakdowns. We e-mail, browse, fax, pixel, and cell-phone every waking hour of the day, misinterpreting as much as we communicate because the medium changes meaning and masks motive and intent. We have lost touch with our own motivations as well. The more we communicate electronically, the more we misinterpret, deepening levels of displacement and amplifying our desire for acceptance. Many of us take offense or take the offensive, complicating our lives because we have forgotten basic consumerism: Why did we buy the technology? Does it suit our needs? Does it advance or undermine our priorities? How are we using it at home and work and what is that use displacing? How has computer access altered our primary relationships and community activities? How much are we spending annually for access fees, computer equipment, software, upgrades and repairs, credit card debt, and more for the convenience of on-line shopping so that we do not have to leave our homes?

If we fail to answer these questions, marketing will.

Loss of Perspective

To feel accepted rather than displaced, we must repatriate to our communities, where most of our transactions and interactions should occur. However, to participate productively in community, we must develop interpersonal skills and ethical habits. When we do, perception becomes keen. We ascertain goals and priorities, emphasizing the essentials of life:

- *Unconditional Acceptance.* Partners and/or children to love and be loved by.
- *Meaningful Relationships.* Significant networks of friends and colleagues who work with us toward common goals that benefit partners, children, and shared living space.
- *Civic Engagement.* Contributions that enhance the well-being of others or the vitality of community.
- *Insight.* Clear vision of challenges that undermine love, friendship, well-being, and community.

- *Discretion.* Experience or knowledge to accept what we can change and what we cannot, living in the moment rather than reacting to it.
- *Mindfulness.* Leaving relationships and environments in better shape than we found them.
- *Gratitude.* Appreciating the blessings of each phase of biological life, from childhood to having children, from respecting the elderly to becoming the elderly, reflecting on the love, friends, and contributions of mortal life.

These principles shaped the values of past generations that knew the importance of community. That standard can exist again when individuals address consequences of the interpersonal divide and influence the future directions of media and technology. Otherwise marketing will continue to oversell information as an essential commodity. Internet users are drowning in information—much of it unreliable, deceptive, or downright fraudulent. So much information is available that the most important data—possessing economic and proprietary value—are routinely withheld from public view. According to educator Lelia Green, author of *Communication, Technology and Society*, “Although our economy is an information economy and information continues to proliferate and accumulate, it is often the withholding of information that has the capacity to generate the greatest value.”⁵⁸ In that sense, digital-divide arguments about access for the social underclasses really do not address the fundamental problem, debated in the United States since Frederick Douglass in the nineteenth century, of *access to education* as an overriding principle of social equity in the Republic. Access to Internet without equitable educational opportunity further disenfranchises the underclasses. As Green aptly states, “[T]he information poor often don’t know where to start looking.”⁵⁹ Worse, when they do gain access, they not only are buried in information but also in marketing pop-ups, promotions, and spam that often target the information poor, precisely because they lack the discernment required to navigate the corrupted Web.

Even the most privileged, educated sectors of society—including academia—routinely fall prey to viruses, scams, and marketing ploys, as evidenced by the millions pumped annually into technology support, the digital janitors of the Information Age. We are living as much

in the "Age of Information *About* Information" as we are living in the Information Age. There is a critical difference. Information is educational because it transforms data into knowledge and, as such, enhances life and shapes character. Information usually sells once or sells the same thing repeatedly, the way that a book sells, or a seminar. Information *about* information sells as often as marketers can devise ways to mete out access to the databank, search engine, or electronic device, from monthly fees for Internet-based software use to annual ones for data search privileges. As Nicholas Negroponte, founder of MIT's Media Lab, muses in an intriguing but nevertheless shortsighted book, *Being Digital*, "TV Guide has been known to make larger profits than all four networks combined," suggesting "that the value of information about information can be greater than the value of information itself."⁶⁰ Negroponte's book, published in 1996 about emerging technologies, is a good but outdated read, not because his prophecies about the digital world are flawed fundamentally; they aren't. But because, like most scientist-professors, he failed to factor into his vision of a brave new electronic world, marketing's role in overselling information.

With so much emphasis on information, addressing the various digital divides, citizens ought to be well-informed. That is not the case. Relatively few technophiles, even ones who are college-educated or college educators, apprehend the import of scientific discoveries. These discoveries, especially in physics and molecular biology, occurred because of computer networks, databanks, and technology, splendid tools when used properly. Instead of informing the public about discoveries, the news media, largely ignorant about science, missed or hyped these stories, focusing on entertainment coverage or celebrity news, as prescribed by their own marketing reports. According to Haynes Johnson, Knight Chair at the University of Maryland's Philip Merrill College of Journalism, the public needs more news on such topics as environmental degradation, global warming, and "revolutions of science, health and technology that are changing life as never before, presenting grave risks as well as great promise."⁶¹ He adds, "This is what news is made of, the *real* stuff of journalism, far more significant than anyone's 15 minutes of scandal, celebrity or fame."⁶²

The news media have yet to embrace that standard. Case in point: Between 1992 and 1994, NASA's Cosmic Background Explorer Satellite Program had been processing data that affirmed the Big Bang. Physicist Stephen Hawking, usually understated, proclaimed this "the

discovery of the century, if not of all time."⁶³ However, when COBE's project leader George Smoot published his findings in *Wrinkles in Time*, released in 1994, he had to compete with "the trial of the century" involving O.J. Simpson's purported slayings of his wife and companion. Hence the public was not adequately informed about a cosmological model that rivaled that of Copernicus. Breakthroughs in molecular biology were equally significant. Coverage, however, was often sensationalized, beginning with the first cloned sheep "Dolly" (invoking her Dolly Parton mammary namesake) and continuing with genetic therapies and stem cell research, all of which was covered theatrically, politically, or not at all.

Then there are issues of privacy—routinely violated by marketing and technology—in return for access to the databank or service or in return for the promotional free gift. Even virtual homesteader Howard Rheingold acknowledges that risk, noting that individual dossiers are gold mines for "professional privacy brokers" who are beginning to discover that the masses "would freely allow someone else to collect and use and even sell personal information, in return for payment or subsidies."⁶⁴

Profit notwithstanding, data collection and public access to online information can heal us in the right hands or harm us in the wrong ones. Medical technology saves lives. However, improper access to digital dossiers may breach privacy as never before. Richard Smith, chief technology officer for the Privacy Foundation, has warned that most people believe that personal information about them is intensely private; marketers view such information as just another commodity. As example, Smith notes that patients using the antidepressant Zoloft may fill prescriptions at pharmacies that record every purchase in a computer network operated by a management firm, which processes benefits and insurance information. Writes Smith:

This information is then provided to drug companies for marketing purposes. Doctors typically receive phone calls from drug company sales persons that go something like this: "We see that last year you only prescribed our drug 15 percent of the time to treat a particular condition, yet the national average is 30 percent. What can we do to get this percentage raised?"⁶⁵

That kind of casual marketing use, Smith adds, violates a person's privacy to such extent that he or she may have difficulty obtaining health

insurance or even a job. Worse, some supermarket and pharmacy chains create a two-tier system of clientele—those with store-issued savings cards and those without. Cards provide discounts, which companies recoup by selling marketing data tracking consumers' purchases, even prescriptions. So no discount actually is given, even though we perceive that it is. Finally, the emphasis on marketing creates a two-class system: *those who can afford to pay more and keep their privacy . . . and those who cannot.*

Tim Berners-Lee, inventor of the World Wide Web, believes that misuse of private information is the paramount concern for most consumers. "With consequences ranging from the threat of junk mail to the denial of health insurance, the problem is serious, and two aspects of the Web make the worry worse. One is that information can be collected much more easily, and the other is that it can be used very easily to tailor what a person experiences."⁶⁶ Berners-Lee is alluding to the influence of technology on perception, which has become so pervasive that we no longer even acknowledge it—even when failing to do so results in fraud and unfairness.

Cyber crime has risen with proliferation of home computers in typical households. Offenses in virtual environs are complicated by the absence of physical place, an issue to be analyzed later. People are stalked, defrauded, and victimized through networks so that the authorities do not know whom to charge: the person who owns the server but not the specific computer, the person who owns the specific computer but may not have used it to commit a crime, the person who may have used it from another computer and server, and so on, a situation compounded by jurisdiction, because all this can happen from any point on the globe. The consequence of that is appalling. When law enforcement cannot enforce the law, victims are dehumanized twice—by crime and lack of redress—resulting in the obliteration of rights, along with place and identity.

Without interpersonal intelligence, we are never really sure of our roles, responses, and emotions. That causes stress and undermines perception, too. How can we discern challenge or seize opportunity when we are apt to mistake opportunity for challenge and vice versa? No self-help manual will help, despite the testimonials of marketing, because what one person sees as an opportunity—a change in career or marital status—another may see as a challenge, based on how each individual perceives the situation. And perception varies from

person to person based on development of conscience and consciousness, both of which suffer when people lack time to interact meaningfully with others or to reflect on actions affecting others. Technology was supposed to help. Computers, meant to simplify tasks and reduce workload, have done just the opposite. According to Jill Andresky Fraser, finance editor of *Inc.* magazine, "The overwork, stress, and insecurity of today's workplaces has been exacerbated, not relieved, by the proliferation of high-tech equipment—laptop computers, cell phones, electronic desk calendars, beepers, portable fax machines, Palm Pilots, and more—that help people try to keep up with growing workloads while also making it impossible for them to fully escape their jobs and relax."⁶⁷ Without relaxation, we cannot appreciate the life journey of the human condition, which all of us share.

A Lifelong Quest

It bears repeating. This book is not a self-help manual with steps to attain acceptance. The subtitle of this book, *The Search for Community*, is a lifelong quest driven by our collective need for acceptance. The journey has spiritual and Darwinian ramifications, depending on one's religion or worldview. Arguments can be made that humans are social creatures whose survival relies on how they treat others in community or that humans are spiritual creatures whose salvation relies on the same criterion. Accordingly our hunger for acceptance has meaning because it brings us into contact with others and educates us by pang of conscience or pain of consciousness. In the end no one escapes consequences of the human condition. The search for community begins and ends with acceptance of that condition upon which biology and theology rely, requiring us:

- To be aware that life is short and so must be enjoyed, forcing us to relish each moment of beauty, grace, or compassion and learn from each moment of loss, pain, or betrayal.
- To feel alive when childhood ends and responsibility begins, when reproduction ends and middle age begins, when wisdom begins in old age only to end with the obliteration of consciousness . . . or the eternal metamorphosis thereof.

Media and technology, when used properly, can aid us in the search for community. They are potent tools that require more than installa-

tion manuals or programming guides. We need to appreciate how they affect our lives at home and at work and how we can use them wisely to preserve our perception, priorities, and, above all, *principles*. In that respect there is hope in the high-tech media world.

In past eras, people had two sets of values—one at work and one at home. The work ethic usually was influenced by specific professions and the personal ethic, by family. Increasingly, people of conscience advocate one set of values to serve in both places. *That makes sense*. Because media and technology transcend place, so must our values. Naturally those values differ from person to person but rely on conscience and consciousness working in tandem to enrich community, to which all paths lead, according to dictates of the human condition. As we shall see in the next chapter, understanding that condition emphasizes common bonds and can help us feel at peace and empowered.

Journal Exercise

Take an inventory of media appliances and technology devices in your home and workplace/school. Make observations about each appliance and device, concerning:

- *Utility*. Which ones are efficient and why? Which ones are intrusive and why? Which ones are used primarily for (a) entertainment, (b) information, (c) communication?
- *Time*. Which ones save time and which waste time? How, if at all, is time saved and how do you spend that spare time—in real or in virtual environments?
- *Impact*. Which ones influence relationships at home and at work/school, for better or worse? Which ones blur boundaries between home and work/school? How much money do you spend each month operating or using these appliances and devices, including estimated electrical costs, monthly fees or service charges, upgrades and accessories, and so on?

Discussion/Paper Ideas for Chapter One

- Discuss observations from the Journal Exercise above.
- Discuss the validity of these assertions:

1. Technological displacement occurs when we experience:
 - ✓ Clash of environments, virtual and real.
 - ✓ Blurring of work-home boundaries.
 - ✓ Blurring of role and identity.
 - ✓ Influence on values and priorities.
 - ✓ Impact of all of the above on relationships.
 2. We are living as much in the “Age of Information About Information” as we are living in the Information Age.
 3. Without interpersonal intelligence, we are never really sure of our roles, responses, and emotions, especially when we spend significant time each day consuming media and using technology.
- Discuss central theses and themes on displacement from Suggested Readings below.

Suggested Readings from Chapter One

- Green, Lelia. *Communication, Technology and Society*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2002.
- Gurak, Laura J. *Cyberliteracy: Navigating the Internet with Awareness*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001.
- Kunstler, James Howard. *The Geography of Nowhere*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994.
- Kunstler, James Howard. *Home from Nowhere: Remaking Our Everyday World for the 21st Century*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996.
- Putnam, Robert D. *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000.
- Schor, Juliet B. *The Overworked American: The Unexpected Decline of Leisure*. New York: Basic Books, 1992.