

## Here and There

As I write this I am here and you are there. In your everyday life with other people, do you find sometimes they stop paying attention to you in favour of a digital device with a small silver screen? Their mind needs to go **there** as well as being **here** – at least for a little while. You may have stood wanting to talk to someone but couldn't because he or she was occupied with their screen. It's probably a waste of time to talk to people who are intently engaged with the internet. We've always been able to travel elsewhere in our imagination, of course, but we can be **there as well as here** with such incredible ease in this modern age that it affects the way we use our mind.

For many people today the online world (or digitally connected environment) seems to be as comfortable as the physically present world. It's not the same as going elsewhere in your imagination because things happen of their own accord at the other end – words, pictures, games, puzzles – with which you can connect. Many of us are using it to **connect with other people** from which the idea of pseudo-proximity arises – being 'in the same room' with the person you see and hear on the screen (using Skype, for example). I've read about small children who have a 'face-time' conversation with a grandparent before going to bed and snuggle down hugging their iPad.

As you know I don't believe in denying or defying modern ways of using our minds; my concern is to try to understand their effects on the healthy biological process of mind and to ask the question: what is the best use of my mind in these circumstances. To this end I have studied a book by Laurence Scott called *The Four-Dimensional Human - Ways of Being in the Digital World*. I found it quite a difficult book to read, though it is amazingly detailed and eloquent in describing what it actually **feels** like to be fully immersed in the digital world and also has a lot of literary allusions, the author being a lecturer in English.

I like to explore the mental shapes that configure our meaning so I was curious to know how being four-dimensional might help. In the past 'the fourth dimension' referred to a special (perhaps spiritual) state that was somehow beyond the normal world we live in. Being online does seem to add another dimension somehow to the way we use our mind. Once there, we are only minds – we have no body. The horizon disappears – the scale is unbelievably vast. Connectedness is so **diverse** and so **constant** that it is different.

The simplest way to think of four dimensions is to add **time** to the three dimensions of space (length, breadth and height).<sup>1</sup> Scott says that an online moment is four-dimensional because it is immediate (happening now) despite being spatially separated. I suppose that was what alarmed people about the first telephone or telegraph, but now it feels quite normal. When we are doing it all the time, though, the way you establish your identity is affected.

Some early users of the internet gloated that they were **free**. They said: you can't control us now or punish us because we are invisible and anonymous. Thus the door was opened for **all manner of deception** because the others there are shadowy figures too. But the **paradox** is that, over time, everyone is desperately trying to establish an **identity** in the online world.

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<sup>1</sup> You can also draw four dimensions in **space** (you only see them all from different angles) and studies have shown that the human mind can navigate these after some practice. They are used in computer gaming.

**Social media** is the place where you say: this is me, this is who I am (and I hope you like me). And I like you. Pictures help a lot, but because it's a meeting of minds without bodies there is a great reliance on words. New names are created because everything needs a label. We have more nouns and categories now than ever before, which is a totally left-brain activity that can actually diminish meaning – like ticking boxes. For example, the hashtag #MeToo on Twitter that has alerted our society to the need for cultural change is now so broadly used that it may not refer to the people who need it most. I did social media in a minor way for many years and then left it completely because, as a way to use my mind authentically and lovingly, it wasn't thoroughly satisfying. Many of my friends and relatives do enjoy it though and find it useful.

Another challenge to your authentic identity is the fact that there are '**answers**' for everything in the online world. These are so easy to reach they don't allow the 'phone a friend' option in quiz shows any more. Ready answers don't require any creativity and are often wrong. It is far more important to devise intelligent questions that will guide our thinking and the use of our minds into the future.

So why do I happily choose to **use my mind in the online world** for quite a few hours each week? I'm lukewarm about the fourth dimension, but my online experience adds something dimensional by extending the reach and enlarging the scope of my mind. I think of it as a **great expander** of the way I use my mind because I can learn about new books and ideas, read and listen to interesting people and delve more deeply into complex ideas than I ever could before. I emphasise that **being online is only one part of my everyday mind**. Some people disappear from the real world altogether, which is sad. If I couldn't use my online experience in my life with real people I think its main benefits for me would be lost.

I've passed on a few things about the work of Brené Brown, for example. As a social scientist studying the important topic of **shame**, with people's stories as her main research tool, she was gifted from the beginning (and very Texan), but more or less unknown outside her University at Houston. At 40 she had to self-publish her first book *Women and Shame* (it came out later as *I Thought It Was Just Me*). But, by the time she was 45, her TED talk, *The Power of Vulnerability*, had gone viral (as they say) and is now one of the five most viewed TED talks of all time – tens of millions of people have watched it– and she is one of the most popular authors and speakers today. She has written not one, but five, NY Times #1 bestselling books. *The Gifts of Imperfection* was the first one I read (and I still think it's the best guide to being authentic) followed by *Daring Greatly*, *Rising Strong*, *Braving the Wilderness*, and just last month, *Dare to Lead*. I certainly don't agree with everything she says, but I'm grateful to the online world for having put her mind within reach of mine.

Her philosophy is very helpful for learning to be yourself and live **wholeheartedly**. She manages to turn **vulnerability** into a **strength**, which is so necessary in the twofold process of (1) creating your own identity and (2) using it to make the best connections – that is, **practicing love**. This is much easier to achieve when you are **here and now**, rather than **there**.

At the same time she shows how the **courage** to embrace all sorts of things that are **different** from yourself is necessary for **love** to thrive. She writes about 'the quest for true belonging and the courage to stand alone.' May your own experience of the mythical fourth dimension be the right one for you.