



THE STOLEN CHILD PROJECT

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Is our 21st century child lost in a wilderness of technology?

I know I am not the only one to consider they have been on a journey in this life, and I am sure I am not alone in feeling like I am pretty lucky to have been born where and when I was. This is especially true in the face of the scale, speed and tempo of changes in 21st century life. which is already redefining our role as a species on this planet.

When I think about our species and what we know about it from an anthropological view in that, amongst other things we are not drawn to large, quick and relentless change, I wonder in this 21st century, how much more can we take? And where are we all going to?

Like many things, it is sometimes hard to put one's finger on when that 'aha moment' comes, ...that moment when one sits up and takes notice, like no other time or moment before it...a connecting of certain dots, which, in themselves are interesting though unremarkable, but when put together, paint a summation which shakes you to your core.

Such for me is the matter of connection technologies and humanity and the human village. And it begins with our children.

I think of our first nation's people who would look back seven generations and forward seven generations before they would settle on a future plan ...I think of Ronald Wright's book *The History of Progress* where he reminds us that "every time history repeats itself, the price goes up." And it is from this anthropological point of distance and time, that I have begun my own journey of examination... as to why in this 21st century, we are severely challenged to define exactly what family and friendship mean.

I am reminded of and inspired by a wonderful lecture by British anthropologist Robin Dunbar, called *Can The Internet Buy You Friends?*

<http://tedxtalks.ted.com/video/TEDxObserver-Robin-Dunbar-Can-t>

When speaking to a group of youth, Professor Dunbar, challenges their concept of friends as defined by Facebook. A large part of his professional research has focused on what determines the desirable group size of mammals, *including us!* He would discover that the physiological reason was the ratio between the neo-cortex –the site of our highest brain functions– and the ‘group size’ that makes for best social relationships.

For dogs, the ideal pack size was around 50 and for elephants the preferred herds were larger still. For humans, he discovered an ideal group size was about 150. The size of an English or a Tuscan village. This principle is now widely accepted as the ‘Dunbar number’ and Malcom Gladwell captures this fascinating fact about ideal human group size in his best seller *The Tipping Point*.

When I read this, my mind went immediately back to my formative years in Morden, Manitoba in the 1960’s and 70’s.

Along with my parents and both sets of grandparents, there were aunts and uncles and close family friends. We shared meals together, especially including traditional Sunday dinners; we met at various social gatherings, at variety nights, at dances or skating. As kids, we had paper routes and the run of the town, and of course, we were told not to come home until the street lights had come on. The concept of a ‘play date’ would have been as foreign as Mars.

The milk man lived with his family just down the street and many a morning my childhood slumber would be jostled by the tinkle of the milk bottles on the step as the streets and town life were slowly awakening. We would walk to school and back each day and our parents knew our teachers. Our teachers knew our parents, and home and school sang from the same song sheet as it pertained to discipline, attendance, and the curriculum. The teachers lived in the community, and we’d see them at the grocery store or at church.

As Robin Dunbar would explain, this village for the human species would feel comfortable, secure and accountable amongst people the inhabitants knew. Everyone had a vested interest in knowing about each other and helping out, wherever they could. With fewer financial and technological resources than we have now, there was a strong social cohesion with the neighbours and the village. The primal urge to ‘look

after their own' would take over. The proverbial adage 'It takes a village to raise a child' was more or less alive, well and intact".

But where are such communities today? Have we lost them? Is it possible to create them again?

Award-winning Canadian writer, Charles Montgomery goes on to look at these issues in his fascinating book called [Happy City: Transforming Our Lives Through Urban Design](#). In his book he describes extensive research into the psychological impact created by architecture and urban design. He points out that at various stages along the way and more recently in the 1970's and 80's, town and city design in North America would take a turn away from the village.

The dominance of the car would become prevalent, as we as a species started to experiment with many different modalities of living. The vast development and suburb model would take hold. By the 1980's, gone were the corner stores, the local post office, and the sidewalks which would lead us to and from work, school, places of worship and the various places which facilitated our connectedness.

Car culture would now dominate. Day-to-day human contact was significantly reduced, as life became (supposedly) easier and convenient.

And yet it wasn't just architecture or urban design which may have taken a left turn in the 1980's. According to clinical psychiatrist Dr Gordon Neufeld and Dr Gabor Mate, in their ground breaking book [Hold Onto Your Kids](#), there was also a fundamental change in the way that parents related to their children.

Neufeld and Mate argue that in the context of the clinical terms of attachment and bonding (1.) which children have always had with their parents, grandparents and extended family, this attachment started to become unmoored around the end of the second world war, coinciding with the advent of television. This early introduction of mass media, which, along with *Leave it to Beaver*, would bring sophisticated marketing for all manner of things including addictive substances such as cigarettes and sugar-laced foods.

Now it was not just the family and the village which had the children's attention. Gone were the days when children tasted the raw edge of boredom and had to use their own imaginations and creative energies to entertain themselves. Parents and families, not equipped with media analysis training, got a sharp taste of the media invasion and all that has come with that and which has only grown to this day.

Professor Henry Giroux of McMaster University argues that the very nature of youth, so often spoken of as 'our future' is being changed as they are being "*carpet-bombed with consumer culture.*"

<http://www.cbc.ca/radio/ideas/disposable-youth-1.3036140>

So, in this age of disruptive technologies, which has equipped us with terms such as 'digital dementia' and 'nature deficit disorder', I hear so many parents and families lament that they don't know what has hit them or their children. Their adolescent children have not acquired vital person-to-person communications skills. For girls it has come primarily through the instant and perpetual 'connectedness' provided by their 24/7 smartphones.

(see CNN documentary Being Thirteen) <http://www.cnn.com/specials/us/being13>

... for boys, its particularly the X-boxes and other gaming devices which offer hours of so-called 'playtime' at a screen filled with heavy violent images (see *Boys Adrift or The Collapse of Parenting* by Dr Leonard Sax).

These parents are puzzled on how to sort the good from the bad, or on how to understand cause and effect when it comes to such issues as self-esteem, mental health, suicide and bullying.

I hear experts across a broad spectrum of professions who are speaking out with great concern, be they clinical psychiatrists, paediatricians, optometrists or medical doctors. They speak of afflictions involving vision, sleep, Type 2 diabetes, attention deficit disorder and even endocrine system problems, which can determine so much of our human development.

As Dr Arik Sigman speaks to in his 2013 report to the European Union, "*this is not a cultural conversation about how children spend their leisure time*" but rather, "*...screen time has become a medical issue.*"

<http://www.ecswe.com/downloads/publications/QOC-V3/Chapter-4.pdf>

Unfortunately, many of these experts attest that they are not being heard or given standing in the community, and that the most significant and alarming fact, which is being lost in the ether, is that many of these devices are *highly addictive*.

Some argue that school boards and ministries of education have become main proponents of this high tech approach to education and hence enablers in the disruption of family life.

- Teachers lament that they are forced to learn and incorporate the various technologies into the classroom and into the curriculum, (often without proper instruction themselves) only to sometimes abandon them;
- or that they can't compete with the action figures the children are consuming off-hours;
- or that there is not a companion curriculum to educate and warn students and families about the perils of the internet, which include: pornography, fraud, cyber-hacking and bullying.

Small neighbourhood schools, which were once part of village life, have closed in the name of efficiencies, only for children to be bussed long distances, armed with their Smartphones as ways of now staying 'connected' with the parents who used to walk them to school.

School boards themselves have become mammoth operations which many parents find impenetrable and who, one worries, may be listening more to Microsoft and Apple, instead of focusing on the growing body of research being compiled in this big digital experiment.

It was informative that the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development's (OECD) most recent report on technologies in schools states that more technology does not necessarily mean better learning...

<http://www.oecd.org/education/students-computers-and-learning-9789264239555-en.htm>

and that "even countries which have invested heavily in information communication technologies, (ICT) have seen no noticeable improvement in their performances in PISA results for Math, Science and reading."

Indeed, an alternative to this phenomena can be witnessed in various [Waldorf/Steiner](#) schools around the world, who have made the conscious decision to delay the introduction of any connection technologies until grade 8 and who have gone on to produce graduates who are Nobel Laureates, a CEO of American Express and a Prime Minister of Norway and ironically, work in many IT companies.

<http://www.steinerwaldorf.org/waldorf-graduate-gets-a-nobel-prize/>

I think about what other things could be done with an average school board's IT budget!

So, when one pulls back and looks at this from the anthropological stand point as [Drs Neufeld and Mate](#) are doing, they argue, that *for the first time in human history and since the advent of mass media and connection technologies*, they are witnessing the complete migration of children's attachment, formerly with their parents, now move to their children's peers. If that is indeed the case, we now have *children raising children*.

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So where do these technologies come from and who is behind the Silicon Valley's kool-aid? In Ira Basin's radio documentary *The Valley of the Kings*

<http://www.cbc.ca/radio/thesundayedition/the-niqab-and-citizenship-the-bystander-effect-train-love-in-the-valley-of-the-kings-1.2963290/in-the-valley-of-the-kings-an-ira-basen-documentary-1.2963565>

... he pulls back the curtain on Silicon Valleys' latest gift to the world, the 'sharing economy', and the disarming language of 'friend, like, connection, community, and do your own thing, making the world a better place...' Some would say they are in the business of co-opting the language of the village but delivering nothing but loneliness and alienation.

But he asserts that when you look past these feel-good words, you get a glimpse of what is really in store – a future where tech wizards, not governments, make the rules. I am reminded of this when I see the photo ops, as I did recently, of the World Economic Summit in Davos, Switzerland where in amongst the democratically-elected members of our western nations, are the tech titans from Silicon Valley such as Bill Gates and Mark Zuckerberg. We are definitely living in a different permutation of 'democracy' now.

(also hear: CBC's Sunday Edition *What's Not to Like about Facebook?*)

<http://www.cbc.ca/radio/thesundayedition/surviving-a-tough-interview-revolutionary-presidential-candidates-facebook-s-rise-to-global-domination-1.3443850/facebook-what-s-not-to-like-an-ira-basen-documentary-1.3445888>

This is the industry which brags about their 'disruptive innovations' or as companies such as Uber like to put it, their 'principled confrontation of the law' and who invite their relatively few female employees who envision having families one day, to defer

that life goal into their forties, as the company will, as part of its benefit package, pay for the freezing of their eggs.

Some days, it feels like we are in some bad science fiction movie, crossed with Orwell's *1984* and Margaret Atwood's novel, *The Handmaid's Tale*. One also wonders if we are like the frog in the boiling water ...we won't know what has happened to us until it is too late.

At a time when Mark Zuckerberg is discussing a brave new world of virtual reality and artificial intelligence,

<http://www.businessinsider.com/mark-zuckerberg-interview-with-axel-springer-ceo-mathias-doepfner-2016-2>

the great scientist Stephen Hawking has urged a slowdown in this technological 'star wars' until we can take stock and plot out together, where we want to go from here. He, along with Tesla founder Elon Musk, warn that artificial intelligence "*is the human species biggest existential risk.*"

<http://www.bbc.com/news/technology-30290540>

(Note to reader: Centre for the Study of Existential Risk <http://cser.org/>)

We observe from research such as that outlined in Nicholas Carr's book [*The Shallows: \(What the Internet is Doing to Our Brains\)*](#), that the human brain, the organ which is needed to navigate through all the challenges of our time, is not only under attack, but is already in the process of changing its very physiology.

There has been great merit in a lot of our recent technological advances. I use many of them. I drive a car, I use a computer and it is quite possible that you are reading this very document via the internet.

And yet, connection technologies alone have pushed further and faster than laws and governments around the world have been able to keep up with, whether it has to do with privacy, fraud, pornography, copyright or cyber-security. And in the absence of public discourse and informed consent, they have pushed and continue to push our society and especially our families to the brink.

When one looks at the range of challenges that youth and their families experience now, be it bullying or vulnerability to radicalisation, one quickly realizes there is a

catastrophe looming in contemporary family life. Unfettered technology has changed our village... our way of life... our childhood.

Most childhood experts and paediatricians will agree that children and the human species will thrive and develop their capacities and capabilities in settings of;

- unconditional love , bonding and attachment
- a place which provides a sense of security and safety,
- a place which provides continuity, routine, consistency, and predictability which comes with the rhythm and structures of a well-balanced daily life....but not a life of constant change. We can and have adapted to change but on a very slow and long term basis. And yet, the number of changes families have been and continue to be confronted with in daily life many argue is simply not sustainable.

Robin Dunbar and many others who have studied humans as a species, recognize that we have been given a physiological and psychological budget and that there is a sweet spot in which we operate...and that if we live beyond that budget, there are consequences. So, if we, as a species, thrive in a kind of 'village-like setting' how does one bring that back to family life in this day and age?

And perhaps the answer is 'together', 'by helping each other', by helping to create a supportive and sustaining village of shared interest and worthwhile goals.

And this must begin with us.

In the face of this big digital experiment, perhaps we need not adopt the determinist language of the high tech world which often state that the future "*will*" be this or that, with the implication that we better get on board so as not be left behind and that we have no choice in the matter.

But rather, demand a role in a robust analyses of the benefits and the detriments of connection technologies and a fair and democratic process of consensus in deciding what should and should not be used and when and by whom, especially when it comes to our children.

Perhaps, those who now find themselves as part of a generation which knew life before these digital times, should be reminded not to denigrate themselves just because they cannot manage a Smartphone as well as their 5 year old grandchild!! But rather, remind one's self, that technological conversancy does not equate with the knowledge and wisdom gained over a life time which is needed more than ever as we navigate our way through these uncharted times.

1. **Bonding**, as Frank G Bolton, Jr. explains in *When Bonding Fails* is a unidirectional process that begins in the biological parent-primarily the mother-during pregnancy and continues through birth and the first few days of life. It is the parent's instinctive desire to protect the infant. **Attachment** takes more time and more interaction between a parent and child. It is a reciprocal process between a parent and a child that develops during the first year they are together and is solidified throughout the relationship. It is the development of a mutual feeling that the other is irreplaceable. (as quoted from *Raising Adopted Children* by Lois Ruskai Melina)