

Social distance, science and fantasy



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Humanities enrich human interaction and allow us to take part in the dreams, visions and fantasies of others.

In these times of Covid-19 isolation, social distance gets on the nerves of several of us and the effects may be long-lasting, even endemic. Many school children have interacted and still meet with their teachers through computer networks, while the same phenomenon applies to their contact with others. Technical devices are with an ever-increasing scope becoming an integral part of all communication, teaching, and entertainment, in short – of social interaction. When it comes to education, given all the poor and even harmful educators we are forced to encounter during our lifetime, mechanization of education might be perceived as a step forward. Nevertheless, too much dependence on the internet might undoubtedly have its pitfalls; contributing to an abstraction of our existence where real adventures and life-changing encounters with other human beings become all the rarer. The world may be demystified, losing its wonder and magic.

A past closeness between storytellers and listeners is being forgotten and the spellbinding experience of listening to a good storyteller within a fascinating environment is something that many children currently are being denied. Even storytelling in the form of books and movies are becoming rarer, being replaced by video chats, podcasts, twitter and Instagram. Admittedly some video games offer a certain degree of excitement, imagination and storytelling, though most of them provide a one-way communication, which unfortunately is characterized by unbound commercialism, questionable

role modeling, crude violence, nutty conspiracy theories and a glamourization of luxury and greed.

I came to think about this while remembering evenings I spent in isolated places. Some of the communities found there lacked electricity and within a circle lightened by a fire, or a kerosene lamp, with darkness around and the starry sky above, I had the pleasure listening to old women and men telling stories about their surroundings and way of life.

"Listen to the dog howling out there in the dark. I tell you, that is no dog. Oh no, it is a human who has been turned into a dog, or maybe ... a Loup Garou, a werewolf. The butterfly you saw in your room last night, that was no butterfly ... it was your beloved who dreamt about you, far away in another land, while her dream turned her thoughts into a butterfly."

Participating in such enchanted moments make us feel alive. Even if it all might be lore and illusion we feel amazingly present, the world comes closer. A child listening stories about and thus enters fantastic dimensions realizes how vast the world is, how it includes both fiction and reality.

A computer programmer might call this immensity the "Cyber World", an astronomer the "Universe", a biologist the "Biosphere". These scientists are actually knowledgeable of only a fraction of human existence and the laws of nature governing it. Realizing this does not mean that you are a science denier.

Since 16th and 17th centuries, in almost every realm of human existence, progress has been breathtaking, principally by a scientific naturalism which has been used to solve problems, from engineering bridges and eradicating diseases, to



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extending life spans and establishing human rights. However, this does not have to mean that a "scientific thinking and approach" unilaterally ought to dominate all human reasoning and be allowed to despise, forbid and deny the right to make things up, to dream, fantasize, telling about and creating

wonderful things. We have to make room for music, art and literature and allow ourselves and others to be entertained and stimulated by these human expressions. We need to provide depth and relief to our short life spans, our human existence.

These reflections emerged when I as a teacher experienced how art, music, philosophy, history, and comparative religion, as well as gymnastics and handicraft became limited or entirely disappeared from curricula. This was done in favour of more practical purpose-oriented subjects like math, physics, chemistry, business administration and computer science. Of course, these topics are essential for obtaining a solid education and be attractive for the labour market. However, humans do not live on bread alone, our brains are stimulated by inputs like art, music and entertainment. Humanities enrich human interaction and allow us to take part in the dreams, visions and fantasies of others. Let us not deny our children the pleasure of becoming familiar with storytelling; with fairy tales, fantasies, myths and legends, preferably told in communion with others and in harmony with our surrounding world. Not only within realms that is electronically created, but a real world consisting of tangible, impressionable and caring individuals.

The stimulus and pleasure of partaking in storytelling might teach us to look at and perceive human existence from several angles and thus develop into critical thinking individuals able to avoid falling into traps set by Pied Pipers who through the World Wide Web invoke narrow-mindedness, cold-heartedness, prejudices, and greed. (Abridged)

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