Welcome To A Facebook World: Part II

When is the last time someone penned a love letter?Written a poem?Not just quickly jotting-down one's thoughts "in the moment", but composed a well thought-out work of poetry…and then given it to someone…in person.Do we have any interest in engaging in such time-consuming activities anymore?Read a philosophical treatise, you say?Why bother (unless we're forced to do it for a class–as an assignment)? Taking the time to do such things has become almost unheard of.

The meaning of human connection—of the words "conversation" and "friendship"—has been drastically transformed in a world where people ask each other out (and break up with each other) via phone text.A "friend" is a contact. Contacts are things that one accumulates on one's profile page. We assess each other's worth largely in terms of utility: What role can the next guy play in me getting what I want? He may be useful to me? Great, I'll "friend" him.

A social media device called **Klout** will even tell us who is "important" in any given social network. It will do so based on criteria that have absolutely nothing to do with objective merit (and almost everything to do with popularity). The more "friends" one has, the perception goes, the greater is one's merit. The evaluation of a friend's value, therefore, has been automated–rendered a function of sheer popularity.

Even as people send quips back and forth via text (and consider that to be a "conversation"), our ability to engage in worthwhile public discourse has severely eroded.We love our banal chit-chat. We love idle banter. What we DON'T like is on-going, in-depth conversation. So our media has adapted accordingly.For an example of this trend, review the transcript of most talk show "interviews". What one will find is a superficial exchange of quips for a couple minutes at a time, separated by the occasional amusing spectacle and intermittent commercial breaks.

Rarely do we ever engage in a serious discussion about things that really matter—things that are objectively important–things that have profound consequences in the grand scheme of things. Why not? We're too busy fussing over a panoply of petty fixations–delivered to us at every moment by Web 2.0. Preoccupying ourselves with the latest irrelevant drama has become the predominant American pass-time.In the process, our culture has become a parody of itself.

An indication of how pop-culture has adapted to our short attention spans is the format of the typical non-fiction best-seller. Commercial pulp found on the front shelves of the local bookstore is comprised of quick, simple chapters–each consisting of snappy—yet often vacuous—verbiage.We attribute wisdom to celebrity pundits and trendy self-help gurus—all the while failing to recognize that most of them are charlatans.This all passes without notice…as we're busy gossiping with each other and obsessing over trivial matters.

Such developments are harbingers of a gravely dysfunctional culture-to-come. It is a culture where the use of the mind has been relegated to brief, in-the-moment reactions…and a few idle amusements to keep us occupied.Attention spans are reduced to tiny parcels of time. Concentration is limited to snippets of information.The ability to focus, to deliberate, and to reflect is utterly handicapped.It sounds like a bad science fiction novel, portending a bleak future. Alas, we need only take the degenerate tendencies of this new Facebook World to their extreme to make this dystopian future a reality.

It's not merely that people no longer know how to have a serious conversations; it's that they no longer even have the inclination to do so.Human interaction has been reduced to brief exchanges, done remotely—in the interest of efficiency.Most people haven't the slightest interest in engaging in profound discourse any more—as it requires far too much mental effort. Long deliberation is stupendously inconvenient when one is accustomed only to fleeting bouts of shallow mental engagement.

In a recent ad, AT&T bragged that—on its network—one could surf the web WHILE having a phone conversation.This does not bode well for the way in which humans use their minds.Multi-tasking has been elevated to the stature of virtue…even as it portends the obsolescence of sustained concentration.Social networking augurs the end of genuine human interaction.(One is reminded of the Yogi Berra quote, "It was impossible to have a conversation; everybody was talking too much.")

Interviews on the typical talk show are comprised of a brief exchange of sound-bites…and feigned reactions to amusing yet pointless comments.Everything is stage-managed; nothing is authentic.Profundity doesn't matter in an age of theatrics.It only stands to reason that Facebook is more about presentation than about substance.After all, that's precisely what a "profile" is FOR.

The new culture has no place for analytical or critical thinking skills.Such things are no longer required once one is comfortably ensconced in the customized microcosm one has tailored to suit oneself.“Why go to the trouble of furnishing myself with such extraneous aptitudes when our culture no longer values those who procure them?”Why, indeed.

Penetrating critical analysis is far too inconvenient for those who need only point, click, and read a brief passage here and an isolated excerpt there.It should come as little surprise, then, that so many people watch the local news…and FoxNews…and have the impression they’re staying “well-informed”—apprised of what’s “going on” and remaining “in the know”.The illusion is enough.(It’s easier to read tabloid papers like the New York Post / Daily News than to read a 20-page New Yorker article.So guess which kind of activity most people choose.)The result of this is simple: an egregiously dumbed down public discourse.Meanwhile, people end up immersed in echo-chambers: virtual places in which one’s pre-existing notions are perpetually reinforced, rarely subjected to critical analysis.Facebook, after all, isn’t designed for intense critical reflection.It is a site that caters to immediate gratifications.We’ve thus habituated ourselves to an A.D.D. culture.

Short attentions spans and mental lethargy have become the norm.“Don’t write your essays more than 1 page long,” many have advised me, with a raised eyebrow.“If the essay is any longer than a single page, you’ll just LOSE people,” I’m told.I pray that they jest.I think that—surely—they can’t be serious; but they are serious.When most people are acclimated to quick, snappy snippets of information, they become incapable and unwilling to engage in any activity that requires sustained attention.

I grieve for the death of THINKING—even as Malcolm Gladwell sees fit to write a best-selling book called “Blink” that encourages us NOT to take the time to carefully think things through…as if all the problems of the world are due to people thinking too much.“If only we just used our gut more,” is the message of this unfortunate book.(Ironically, only those who DON’T think would take such a thesis seriously.)

Petty concerns and superficiality now dominate the cultural landscape, even as the horizon of human aspiration has been limited to the most vapid aims.But, take heart: vacuous-ness is perfectly fine so long as it’s sufficiently glamorous.The insipid is appealing when dressed up with enough cosmetics.“My life may be existentially empty, but I drive a cool car and wear chic clothes.I may never be erudite, but I have a kick-ass Facebook page.”Behold our ersatz self-esteem.

When a “friend” has come to mean “transient contact” for purposes of sheer utility, something valuable has been lost. Yet we eagerly partake in this “social networking” scheme as if it is somehow enhancing how people connect.

Meanwhile, the network tool **Gawker** keeps us abreast of all the gossip and scandal—day in and day out.But imagine, for a moment, replacing **Gawker** with something called, **Deliberator**.Deliberation?We don’t need the internet for that, do we?Mother Nature equipped us with the necessary equipment for analytical thinking, critical reflection, and contemplation.It’s just that we no longer wish to actually use that equipment…because we now have automated equipment to do all the thinking for us.Splendid.When mental exertion is deemed time-consuming and inefficient, this makes perfect sense.

Mental prosthetics may sound like a good idea, until we realize that they are transplanting rather than complimenting our higher cognitive functions.Serious contemplation?That’s not what Facebook is for.Critical reflection?Social networking isn’t designed for that.Meticulous, in-depth analysis? That doesn’t have a place in a Web 2.0 culture.Patient deliberation?Who has the time anymore?

The pathological myopia engendered by these new modes of interaction has sullied the beauty of human existence.We know how to make a good living, but no longer know how to make a good life.We’re magnificently hyper-connected in one sense, yet utterly alienated from our fellow man in another sense.We’re more “in touch” than ever, yet more isolated than ever.Virtual community may be a wonderful compliment to organic community; but allowing the former to transplant the latter is highly problematic.In this new world, one can be VERY “connected” without having a single HUMAN connection.

We have adopted new expectations and new precedents for daily behavior.Having a rudimentary conversation is now something we should not expect from other human beings, even if it is eminently warranted.It’s just not how people operate anymore. Connecting on a human level is now something we should not expect when others are primarily concerned with your role in their expanding “connectivity”.

As for me, I’ve become an outcast in the new zeitgeist.To become well informed, I tend to read large scholarly works.For this, I am often mocked, patronized…even demeaned.Erudition is scoffed at as pedantry.I’ve become a weirdo in a world that sees edification as a pretentious, snooty endeavor.People want a payoff…now… usually in the form of money or sex or social status.

There’s too much Reality TV to watch, why bother doing something that involves so much cognitive exertion?After a hard day at work, who wants to do something that just sounds like more work?(And who do I think I am, stocking up on so much knowledge?After all, that’s not going to pay the bills!)

Alexis de Tocqueville foresaw the “Facebook World” in which we now find ourselves.De Tocqueville was concerned about a “new form of despotism” that was subtle, not overt, in which all people were controlled by being perpetually distracted.As Thom Hartmann points out in his seminal work, Unequal Protection: “De Tocqueville had a clear and prescient inkling of danger.He saw a nation where people had become isolated in their own homes, uninformed about the rest of humanity, and addicted to some entertainment that was so powerful it separated them from their fellow humans… His description, written in 1831, sounds astonishingly like our world today, which is so often observed as being centered around gratification—and isolation.And the mechanism for this despotism, he said, is the sort of perpetual gratification that keeps people happy.”

Hartmann was, of course, not referring to Facebook, as he made this statement before Facebook existed.Poetically, Hartmann’s book was published the year Mark Zuckerberg launched TheFaceBook.com at Harvard University.173 years earlier, De Tocqueville had written of the danger he envisioned in his Democracy In America:

“The first thing that strikes the observation is an innumerable multitude of men, all equal and alike, incessantly endeavoring to procure the petty and paltry pleasures with which they glut their lives.Each of them, living apart, as a stranger to the fate of all the rest—his children and his private friends constitute to him the who of mankind; as for the rest of his allow citizens, he is close to them, but he sees them not; he touches them, but he feels them not; he exits, but in himself and for himself alone; and if his kindred still remain to him, he may be said at any rate to have lost his country.” [italics mine]

Hartmann notes another passage in Democracy In America, in which De Tocqueville wrote “about what would or could happen if, for example, large corporations were able to pipe 24/7 entertainment and dumbed-down, predigested ‘news / infotainment’ into every home in America”:

“Above this race of men stands an immense and tutelary power, which takes upon itself alone to secure their gratifications, and to watch over their fate.That power is absolute, minute, regular, provident, and mild… It seeks to keep [people] in

perpetual childhood: it is well content that the people should rejoice, provided they think of nothing but rejoicing.Thus, it every day renders the exercise of the free agency of man less useful and less frequent; it circumscribes them well within a narrower range, and gradually robs a man of all the uses of himself.... It has predisposed men to endure [these things], and oftentimes to look on them as benefits.After having thus successively taken each member of the community in its powerful grasp, and fashioned him at will, the supreme power then extends its arm over the whole community."

Of course, here De Tocqueville is referring to what would become what we now call "corporate power".But Facebook now serves as a vehicle for the condition he discusses.It is not ONLY Facebook itself that is doing this, but the general media trends of which Facebook is indicative.In this degenerate state of affairs, De Tocqueville notes: "The will of man is not shattered, but softened, bent, and guided: men are seldom forced by it to act, but they are constantly retrained from acting: such a power does not destroy, but it prevents existence; it does not tyrannize, but it compresses, enervates, extinguishes, and stupefies a people, till each nation is reduced to be nothing better than a flock of timid and industrious animals..."

Such developments have transpired with little attention to the adverse side-effects.We're too busy with our in-the-now gratifications to take note of the dubious long-term consequences.There is certainly something to be said about "living in the moment" in the appropriate context, but there is a time and place for NOT just "living in the moment".This new Facebook World seems to engender an exclusively "here and now" mentality that precludes on-going deliberation, "spur of the moment" reactions rather than patient, in-depth, critical reflection.

Unconcerned about the Big Picture, we're perfectly content to address our own proximate satisfactions.We fixate on the petty and inconsequential even as our civic-mindedness dissolves.Cosmopolitanism is anathema in a Facebook-mediated social network.And so it goes: We buy millions of books called, "The Power of Now" while nobody cares to write a book called, "The Power of Foresight".In our present culture, the latter wouldn't sell very well.