

# The Essential Connection

by Jacqueline Wright, Ed.D.

**I**t is rare to be out in public these days and not see most of the people either listening to or talking on their smartphone. And if you just happen to see someone who isn't absorbed in their phone, just keep watching. It will soon come out of the pocket or purse. I must admit that this experience creates an increasing sense of isolation and unreality for me, and it immediately calls to mind images in the movie *Her*, where the main character's primary relationship is with an operating system, a system that slowly develops into a unique identity in its own right. It's an entertaining story, but it does provoke questions related to its commentary on our emerging technological society and our attachments. Are we relying more and more on a text, a "like" on Facebook or some computer voice to make us feel alive?

We're a rare breed these days if we aren't connected to Facebook or Twitter. A recent study that looked at the impact of social media on persons' lives found that seventy percent of their large sample of participants had a Facebook account (the most common social media site) which parallels the worldwide statistics. But the most interesting thing about the study was that people, particularly those under 35 or 40, were driven to use the technology more by their anxiety than by pleasure. The New York Times defined this reaction as FOMA, a fear of missing out. We can't seem to stop ourselves from updating, checking, liking, and hashtagging. I wonder what this growing obsession means for our psychological well-being.

Recent studies also show that our use of technology is rapidly and profoundly altering our brains. It causes us to think differently, feel differently, even dream differently. And it's probably clear to all by now that an "always-on" environment has the potential to harm genuine human interaction. There is an irony of being more connected than ever, yet being more alone.

On a more positive note, our webbed connections and our TV give us access to what is going on in the remotest parts of the world, and the sheer mass of communications puts us right in the middle of the world marketplace and in touch with other cultures. But does all of this make us feel more alive and connected to each other? I doubt it, and in fact suspect the opposite is true.

My personal observations and experience tell me that the

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space where we can respond, react, imagine, link experiences, thoughts and feelings in person with another person seems to be collapsing. We all become more deeply alive and in touch with all of ourselves when we are physically present. Think for example how we feel when someone is actually looking at us and listening to us. Something within comes to the surface and the energy field between us changes as we interact. We shape what is happening in the moment by our very presence, because we bring all of our senses to bear, not just the visual and auditory senses, but our thoughts, emotions and imagination. To come into awareness of ourselves, we need an other's interest in us; we need to see the aliveness—or deadness—in ourselves mirrored back to us.

Jung says that what really makes us feel alive is a connection to something that transcends our ego, what he calls the Self, that organizing pattern of energy that gathers all of the parts of the psyche around a center. But bringing the Self into view requires being with other people. He writes: "One cannot individuate on top of Mt. Everest or in a cave somewhere...one can only individuate with or against something or somebody." (Collected Works, Vol. 1, para 102).

Does our over-reliance and over-dependency on social networks, which become a sort of closed, circular system, really serve our individuation process? Or do these networks that we belong to become our version of the cave Jung mentions? Maintaining our connection to what is real and alive in ourselves in the midst of this circular whirling world of information is no small feat.

As I ponder these questions, my mind goes to a Grimm's fairy tale that speaks about restoration and healing that occurs not through material means, but rather through an elusive substance called the *Water of Life*. The story implies that our success in finding this healing substance depends on our mental orientation. Briefly the story goes like this:

*A King is dying and his three sons want to save him. As they weep in the palace garden, an old man suddenly appears who asks them about their sadness. When they tell the old man that their father is dying, he says "I know a remedy. It is called the water of life. Your father will be saved if he drinks it. But it is very difficult to find."*

*The older son, seeking to inherit the kingdom and be the best-loved of his father, asks his father's permission to search for the healing water. But the King's first response is "No, the danger is too great and I would rather die". But the dying King eventually relents and the first son goes in search of the cure. Once on his journey, he encounters a dwarf in the road who stops him and asks him where he is going in such a hurry. The son, who can't be stopped by the dwarf's questions, offers an insulting reply and rushes on. The angered dwarf then casts a spell upon the haughty prince, causing him to be trapped in a narrow gorge, unable to move. The same thing then happens to the second son, who goes with the same ulterior motive and haughty attitude as his brother and ends up with the same result.*

*When the youngest brother encounters the dwarf on his journey to find the healing water he stops, gets off his horse and answers the dwarf's questions, telling him that he is seeking the water of life for his dying father.*



*The dwarf then tells him where the water can be found and gives him tools and instructions for retrieving it. Following the dwarf's instructions, the youngest brother finds the water of life in an enchanted castle. He also finds an enchanted princess who promises to marry him at the end of a year.*

*For the sake of brevity I won't recount the details of the rest of this long tale. Essentially, the King is made well by drinking the water of life. But the older brothers deceive the King and claim credit for finding the water and the King banishes the younger brother from the kingdom. The truth eventually emerges and the value of the youngest son is recognized by his father. He inherits his father's riches, marries the princess and gains the riches of her kingdom as well.*

If we look at this story symbolically and see the characters as possible tendencies in a psyche, or as tendencies in our own lives, the initial scene depicting a dying King suggests a shut-down of life and a need for renewal. An old way of life is no longer working.

The actions of the three brothers portray typical responses to such a crisis. The image of the sons weeping in the garden suggests that a first response may be sadness, hopelessness and even depression. This is often our initial reaction to the death of an old attitude or way of being. But the admission of hopeless-

ness is an essential part of finding a solution and it often sets something in motion, as represented in the tale with the appearance of the old man. We might think of him as the Wise Old Man, or that inner voice of hope that begins to surface when we are at our lowest. If we listen to it, we're assured that there is a cure for our dis-ease.

Another common response is resistance to change, depicted in the King's initial refusal to let his son go search for the healing water. There can be a strong pull to stay with what is known, even if it isn't working, or even if it kills us. And even when one says yes to the needed change, the response of the two older brothers teaches us that the image of new life is often clothed in old worn out attitudes that have actually created the crisis and need for healing. In their haste to find a solution the first two sons can't be stopped by the dwarf's questions. Their imprisonment between two mountains suggests that they are caught between two opposing positions: they want healing but they also want recognition and approval. This duality limits their vision and they are unable to move forward.

Unlike his two older brothers, the youngest son stops to listen to the dwarf's questions. This suggests that the automated movement has stopped and the psyche is now responsive and has a capacity to listen for unconscious direction, without purpose and intent. This third response often emerges after frustration and failure, which often makes it possible for another attitude to emerge. We see this pattern in many fairy tales, where the older brothers fail to achieve the goal and the younger brother succeeds. Their failure usually comes about because of a failure to acknowledge a source of knowledge or help because it comes from an unlikely source. In this tale, it comes from the dwarf.

The third son represents the essential attitude needed to succeed in the quest for healing. He is no longer double minded, but able to state his need and intent, which is to find the water of life. Being able to state the problem is an important step in the search for healing. The third son is also able to listen to what is offered.

How do we understand the dwarf's presence and function? In our story, he interrupts the forward movement of the three sons and asks them to state their purpose. When the third son stops to listen, he offers the tools and instructions the prince needs to find the water of life. So he possesses secret knowledge and possibilities which may seem small and unimportant but in fact are essential to the task. He also seems to stand at the threshold of "knowing" something. Symbolically, dwarfs are often seen as benevolent creative forces. Their small size suggests a world with different dimensions, or a contact with deeper levels of knowing.

We have dwarf experiences when something jumps into our consciousness, be it an odd idea or association, a body experience, an intuition, a psychic hunch, idea or image. These small messages and opportunities may present themselves when we least expect them. Dwarfs are those voices inside that say Stop! What are you doing? Where are you going? What is really important here?

The real issue is how we respond to the dwarf when he does appear. Do we just keep moving heedlessly forward like the first two brothers, or do we stop and listen to those questions and messages as the youngest brother did? The dwarf's size also suggests that what comes into our consciousness may be some-

thing small that can be easily overlooked, dismissed or seen as initially undesirable.

One way to understand the image of the dwarf is to see it as the voice of the Self that is inserting itself into our limited ego existence and perspective. When the Self makes its appearance, it may disturb us and feel alien to the ego, because it pushes us to see beyond our own ego driven goals and needs. Listening to the Self means opening to a different order, one that sees beyond the dualities we may be caught in. Then the ego has to find its placement within the totality of the psyche of which the Self, not the ego, is the center. This new vision is what really keeps us feeling alive and vibrant because it brings energy and purpose to our lives. But the absolutely necessary condition of this transformation is the ego's willingness to converse with what the Self engineers.

We are all living at break-neck speed these days and taking time to pause and turn our attention to our own inner voices helps to re-center ourselves and hear the truths that are asking to be acknowledged. The pause is where we're more apt to find our emotional center of gravity, which helps us be more fully present in our interactions with others. We can do this (pausing) in small ways every day, by disconnecting from our machines, stopping and just being quiet for a few minutes, listening to our own thoughts and feelings.

Healing in this story comes from the "water of life". In Christianity the term "Water of Life" is used in the context of *living* water. Jesus differentiated the "living water" from the material, common water. He said "Whosoever drinketh of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst; but the water that I shall give him shall be in him a well of water springing up into everlasting life". (John 4:13,14).

Unfortunately, in our present society the time spent on striving for prestige and socio-economic rewards takes precedent over striving for inner knowing and development. But the fairy tale reminds us that the quest for these outer recognitions and accomplishments eventually leads into a ravine, while the inner quest to connect to something larger is what makes us feel alive and connected to ourselves and ultimately to others. The real connection with others can only happen if there is a connection to Self. Ann Ulanov, in her book *The Unshuttered Heart* says "If there is no conversation with others, then there is not enough conversation going on between ego and Self. If there is no conversation between ego and Self, then there is not enough conversation with others. (p. 8)

The technological world, as wonderful and useful as it is, has the capacity to deaden our senses and deprive us of a relationship between ourselves and others. But it can also serve as a wake-up call to refocus our attention to what truly makes us feel alive and connected to those around us. Some things in the world change but the thing that doesn't change is our need to stay awake to our own inner worlds and to make space for the voice of the Self.